CANG WU BIN BAI

TRANSLATED BY E. DANGLARS

GOLDEN TERRACE

黄金台

VOLUME I

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E. DANGLARS

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PROLOGUE

IN THE TWENTY-FIFTH YEAR OF GREAT ZHOU'S YUANTAI ERA, the Eastern Tartars invaded the northern regions.

The Beiyan Cavalry—the border guard—mustered at the Wuding River with the forces of the provinces of Ningzhou and Tongzhou and inflicted a crushing defeat on the Eastern Tartars' troops, driving them back over seven hundred li and retaking the Xiqiu Pass.

In the eighth month of the same year, the Eastern Tartar Uji Tribe begged to surrender and submit to the authority of Great Zhou, become a vassal state, and pay yearly tribute. On the sixteenth day of the eighth month, envoys of both sides completed a ceremony of surrender on the banks of the Wuding River, arranging that the Uji would pay a tribute of furs, medicinal ingredients, horses, gold and silver, and suchlike, and send the Khan's son to the capital to study Central Plains etiquette at the Imperial Academy.

In the ninth month, the court issued a decree, commanding the Beiyan Cavalry's commander, the Marquis of Jingning Fu Shen, to escort the Eastern Tartars' diplomatic mission to the capital to be presented at court.

Hostilities had just been settled, and the Uji had withdrawn beyond the pass. Fu Shen had no fear of leaving trouble behind him for the time being, so he ordered his subordinate Yuan Huan to return to the northern border with their main force, while he personally led a team of elite cavalry to escort the diplomatic mission south.

On the ninth day of the ninth month, the diplomatic mission was passing through the Qingsha Gap when they suddenly sensed the ground start to tremble. The cliffs on both sides collapsed with a rumble. Stones rained down, horses took fright and bolted. In the rush, the carriage of the Eastern Tartars' youngest prince had no time to dodge. It was smashed to pieces by a huge boulder dropping out of the sky.

The terrain of the Qingsha Gap was steep and narrow, but it was situated within Great Zhou and had always been peaceful. Reasonably speaking, there shouldn't have been an ambush. On the way, while Fu Shen had remained alert and taken precautions, he had never thought that there would be a cataclysmic disaster like this on his own doorstep. At first, he had no attention to spare for eldest princes or youngest ones. Seeing falling stones rolling toward him from up ahead, he decisively turned his horse's head, gave a loud cry of "Retreat!" and led the way in a charge back to the entrance they had come in by.

Smoke and dust filled the air, nearly dyeing the whole valley the color of sand. Amid a thicket in the heights, an elaborate crossbow mechanism turned. The coldly gleaming, sinister arrowhead took precise aim at the Beiyan Commander as he urged his horse into a mad gallop.

Keen instincts tempered on the battlefield saved him in this moment of imminent peril. The crossbow bolt streaked toward him. As if he had eyes on the back of his head, Fu Shen flattened himself while yanking on the reins. The cavalry horse came to a sudden halt, its front hooves rising high, and turned a half-circle in place, narrowly avoiding that deadly cold bolt. The arrowhead skimmed past his back, then buried itself with a clang half an inch deep in the cliff face and was immediately drowned in rolling sand and rock.

"Who?!"

Who was trying to kill him?

This ice-cold thought only flashed through Fu Shen's mind for a moment. The next instant, the shouts of his personal guards around him pulled him back to the human world.

"General, look out!"

The boulder falling from overhead blotted out the sky and completely cut off his backward look.

On the ninth day of the ninth month in the twenty-fifth year of the Yuantai Era, the Eastern Tartars' diplomatic mission was attacked in Tongzhou's Qingsha Gap. The Eastern Tartars' youngest prince perished on the spot, and the better half of the diplomatic mission party was lost. The Marquis of Jingning Fu Shen, who had come to escort the diplomatic mission, had his legs crushed by a boulder and was gravely injured. He was taken back to the northern border through the night by trusted bodyguards. While he survived by a stroke of luck, he was unlikely to make a full recovery.

Word was sent back to the capital. It threw the court and the commons into an uproar. At all levels of society, no one was unshaken.

Emperor Yuantai was furious. He issued an imperial edict commanding the three judicial chief ministries to strictly investigate this case, then issued a special decree giving generous compensation to Fu Shen. To the Marquis of Jingning's original official salary, he added one thousand shi; moved to confer upon him the title of General, Defender of the Nation; bestowed a purple ribbon and golden seal; and permitted him to continue to hold his command while he returned to the capital to recover.

The capital was abuzz with the news of Fu Shen's injury. Quite a few people had been making guesses in private as to whose hands the command of the Beiyan Army would fall into now that he had been injured. The emperor's special decree temporarily silenced the multitudinous mouths. His command remained; he was only temporarily leaving the north. If General Fu were sufficiently clever and tactful, he would understand the kind intentions involved when he heard the tune, and after returning to the capital would give up his command in favor of someone more qualified, handing it over to His Majesty—his legs in exchange for a life of glory and splendor.

It would seem then that His Majesty, not merely doing all that humanity and duty called upon him to do for a heroic subject, might even be said to be giving him rather preferential treatment.

The Marquis of Jingning, who was at the center of this gossip, received the imperial decree along with the Beiyan Army, but he made no move. Only at the end of the ninth month did Fu Shen send a memorial to the throne detailing arrangements for handing over military affairs at the northern border garrisons and requesting the emperor to permit him to relinquish his post and convalesce.

At this memorial to the throne, Emperor Yuantai breathed a sigh of relief. According to convention, he refused the resignation request and granted Fu Shen permission to depart the north and return to the capital.

Many people in the capital were counting the days on their fingers and looking out expectantly, waiting to see what this Marquis of Jingning, famed for his military prowess, had become. Meanwhile, thousands of li away, at twilight, a small carriage left heavily guarded Yanzhou City under the escort of bodyguards, speeding in the direction of the capital.

CHAPTER ONE

GOING SOUTH FROM YANZHOU, THEY PASSED THROUGH Guangyang, Baitan, and other such places, until they reached Miyun, at which point the capital city hove into view in the distance.

The weather was chilly with the coming of autumn. In the north, the first snow had already fallen, but in the vicinity of the capital, it was still pleasantly cool, perfectly suited for travel. As midday approached, a team of fine riders came along the public road. The lead rider raised his eyes and looked into the distance from his elevated position. He saw a tea kiosk set up by the road, then gently pulled up his reins, slowing. When the carriage behind him had caught up, he leaned down, knocked twice on the carriage's wooden slats, and requested instruction. "General, we've been going all night. Why don't we stop and rest, then continue on our way?"

A slit opened in the carriage's curtains. A man's deep voice floated out, accompanied by the scent of bitter medicine. "Is there a place up ahead to take refreshment? If so, we should stop here to catch our breath. The men have had a hard time of it."

The man accepted the order. The whole party galloped toward the tea kiosk up ahead, sending clouds of dust flying where they passed, drawing sidelong glances from travelers stopped by the side of the road to rest.

This team of riders bore no banner. They all wore narrow-sleeved, cross-collared military robes of green, each with a vigorous figure, grand and austere. Though they had not made their identities known, the words "not to be trifled with" were written clear as day across their faces.

The proprietor of the tea kiosk had weathered many hardships over the years; he was used to seeing people come and go, and he said no more than was needed. The lead rider dismounted and offered an ingot of silver, then ordered his subordinates to go have some tea and rest; he himself meanwhile found a table in the shade, wiped it clean, and instructed the proprietor to prepare hot tea and several kinds of refreshments. Then he turned and went outside, where he helped a white-faced, frail young gentleman who looked like a chronic invalid out of the carriage.

This gentleman's footsteps were insubstantial. He had a sickly look and could only walk with someone lending him an arm. It took him an age to shuffle over the small distance between the carriage and the tea kiosk. When he had finally sat down at the table, he coughed repeatedly, as though his body couldn't have stood further strain. The other customers sitting under the awning actually breathed a sigh of relief for him when he had he sat down—just watching him had made them feel worn out.

Strange to say, while that man looked like he might breathe his last at any moment, he had an indescribable air about him that made it impossible to take one's eyes off him. He had an outward form that could be picked out at ten thousand li, though his was not the type of elegance beloved of contemporaries, of a man with a face like a beautiful woman, gentle as spring flowers; instead, he had well-drawn brows and phoenix eyes, a high nose and thin lips, an appearance that exuded keenness and bitter cold.

The man was very tall. As if accustomed to looking down at others, his eyelids were half-lowered. He brimmed all over with careless languor. He was also wasted down to a handful of ailing bones. It seemed that even the tea kiosk's somewhat heavy coarse porcelain bowl could snap his wrist with its weight.

But when he sat upright, his gaunt back was perfectly straight, like a stalk of bamboo sticking out of the earth, a sword that had faced fire and been tempered in water, whose chill blade, though riddled with scars, could still drink blood. A feeble body in no way prevented him from looking with scorn upon all around him, marching through the world unhindered.

The merchants traveling on foot couldn't resist craning their necks, just like a gaggle of raptly focused geese. This continued until the young gentleman, after slowly drinking a bowl of tea, put the porcelain bowl down on the table with a clatter. "Gentlemen, your necks are all stretched long enough to be used to tie up donkeys. Well, am I that good-looking?"

The vigorous man eating and drinking beside him gave a shudder upon hearing this. Among the geese, some averted their gazes resentfully, while a few unusually avid ones actually came up to make conversation. "Where did you come from, sir? Are you also going to the capital?"

Xiao Xun, who had been closely waiting upon this master, felt his scalp go numb, ready to hang the speaker from the tree outside if the young gentleman so much as said "Scram."

But who would have thought that this exceedingly standoffish-seeming gentleman would be unexpectedly lenient? He answered mildly, "I came from Yanzhou City in the north, heading to the capital to seek medical treatment."

Their party was dressed informally, not wearing swords, and the carriage wasn't in a very grand style. While the guards were overbearingly lofty, the gentleman in charge wore clothes of ordinary color and cut, which did not appear to be in the fashionable style of the capital. The traveling merchants guessed that they were perhaps the traveling party of the young master of some wealthy family in Yanzhou. Because Yanzhou City was a strategically important location for the defense of the frontier, its customs were aggressive. It really was common to travel with a retinue that came from military backgrounds.

In a chance encounter with a stranger, the traveling merchants couldn't very well inquire directly about his illness, so they turned to speaking of another novel affair. "Since you came from the north, sir, did you happen to encounter General Fu's carriage setting out? He is returning home in glory. What splendor must he be traveling in!"

Xiao Xun nearly choked on his tea. The young gentleman raised his long brows and asked with interest, "General Fu? The same General Fu I'm thinking of?"

"Naturally. Who apart from the Marquis of Jingning has such a glorious reputation?"

The young gentleman seemed to develop an enthusiasm for the conversation. He pursued, "It seems to me that you are quite well informed about... about General Fu?"

"Certainly not, certainly not," his interlocutor said, waving a hand. "We merchants who travel up and down the country often hear news of General Fu on the road. In the years he has defended the northern regions, the roads have been at peace, business has been immeasurably easier to do than before. Even when the common people in the capital speak of General Fu, it is without exception with admiration. You wouldn't know it—last year when General Fu led the Beiyan Cavalry in putting the Tartars to rout, I was coming back from buying furs in the north, and the avenues and alleys were all abuzz, everyone saying, 'With Commander Fu in the north, the capital can sleep easy.' The stories told in the tea shops, the songs sung in the streets, the performances staged in the opera houses—they were all about him and his heroics."

The magnificent reputation of the Beiyan Army and the Marquis of Jingning could be seen from this small example.

The Beiyan Cavalry was known as Great Zhou's line of defense at the northern border. Since its establishment, it had been controlled by the Fu family. Its earlier form had been a border garrison led by the Duke of Ying, Fu Jian.

To the people of the Central Plains, the traveling herdsmen who ruled the grasslands to the north were known as Tartars. Decades ago, the Tartars had experienced internecine strife followed by a schism. A portion of the tribes were forced to move west, where they had dealings and intermarried with the Hu, the Sogdia, and other such peoples of the western regions; they came to be known as the Western Tartars. Another portion, meanwhile, occupied the central and eastern portions of the grasslands, which were comparatively fertile; they were known as the Eastern Tartars. Twenty-three years ago, when Emperor Yuantai, Sun Xun, had recently ascended the throne, the Eastern Tartar tribes had staged an outrageous invasion of Great Zhou. The border forces of the time were weak and folded at a single attack, while the Tartars had a strong military; they cut through the defenses like splitting bamboo. They plundered and massacred without restraint in the north, even turning Xuanqing and Baoning, two strategically important border points, into ghost towns with their slaughter.

During the previous emperor's reign, there had been a lengthy period of peace and prosperity, over thirty years without war. No one had thought that the Eastern Tartars would come south in command of an army, and it had been even more unthinkable that the border forces would be unable to stand up to a single clash with them, letting the enemy reach their gates in the blink of an eye.

Voices in court advocating for peace talks grew louder and louder, but Emperor Yuantai was at that time in the prime of life, utterly unwilling, as the lord of the Celestial Empire, to bow his head before mere barbarians. Fu Jian just happened to have been transferred from the south to Ganzhou due to his meritorious service, so Emperor Yuantai promoted him to military commissioner of Ganzhou and commanded him to lead the forces of the three provinces of Ganzhou, Ningzhou, and Yuanzhou to resist the Eastern Tartars. Over the course of two years, Fu Jian and his two sons, along with the officers under their command, assembled a force of a hundred thousand and eliminated the Tartars inside the pass. Fu Jian's oldest son, Fu Tingzhong, even went past the Great Wall, leading his troops straight into the heart of the grasslands, nearly conquering the Eastern Tartars' capital, failing only because Fu Jian died of illness midway. Following this campaign, Fu Jian was posthumously given the title of Duke of Ying, General, Pillar of the Nation. Fu Tingzhong inherited the title of Duke of Ying and control over the military affairs of the provinces of Ganzhou, Ningzhou, and Yuanzhou. The second son, Fu Tingxin, was given the title of General, Defender of the Nation, and control of the military affairs of Yanzhou and Youzhou.

Together, these two built for Great Zhou an iron line of defense on the northern border. The border forces led by the Fu family came to be known as the Beiyan Cavalry. From the sixth year of Yuantai to the eighteenth year of Yuantai, over a decade, with the deterrent of the Beiyan Cavalry, the Eastern Tartars went into temporary hibernation. The border was at peace. No major hostilities arose.

This lasted until the nineteenth year of Yuantai, when Fu Tingzhong was killed by Eastern Tartar assassins, and the Eastern Tartars allied with the northern border's Zhe Clan to once again invade Great Zhou. Fu Tingxin led an isolated force deep into the enemy's encirclement and ultimately died on the battlefield. There was nearly a reenactment of the enemy host reaching the city gates, but unlike in the previous instance, the court now did not have so many elite soldiers and able generals at its disposal, and Emperor Yuantai was no longer as resolute and enterprising as he had been in his younger years. The war faction and the peace faction argued several times in morning court and at last came to the silliest, yet also the most sagacious decision.

They put forward Fu Tingzhong's eldest son, Fu Shen, who was not yet of age for the capping ceremony, and pushed him out onto the battlefield.

The Eastern Tartars had a bitter hatred for the Fu family, and they had come on this expedition in order to get revenge; it was up to the one who had made the mess to clean it up. Moreover, Fu Shen had been among the army alongside his father and uncle since he was young. It was said that Fu Tingxin often remarked with emotion that "There is a worthy successor in the next generation." So strictly speaking he ought also to count as "command material."

The reasons seemed abundant. But looking back on past dynasties, when had it ever been right for ministers who did nothing but eat all day to hole up at the rear while making a teenager go on ahead to face the jackals and tigers?

Great luck came amid great misfortune. The Fu family perhaps really was a den of stars of command collectively reincarnated. Fu Shen outshone his predecessors. He had an exceptional genius for military command.

The northern frontier was in a state of emergency. Reinforcements could only be requested from nearby Tangzhou and Tongzhou. But when Fu Shen was put forward, he didn't count on obtaining help from his own people. He gathered the Beiyan Cavalry and met the Zhe Clan's main force at Yanzhou's Three Passes, and, with the inducement of opening trade routes and permitting them to join the empire, borrowed the cavalry of the Western Tartars' Yeliang Tribe and outflanked the Tartar-Zhe allied forces, dividing and crushing them. Only by attacking from two angles at once in a pincer maneuver was he able to resolve the threat to the northern frontier.

After the battle, the Yeliang Tribe joined the empire, and its cavalry mixed with the Beiyan Cavalry. Giving as his reason that the front was too long, making it inconvenient to maneuver, Fu Shen returned command of the border forces of the three provinces of Ganzhou, Ningzhou, and Youzhou to the center, concentrating on operating the frontier defenses of Yuanzhou and Yanzhou. Following the Battle of the Three Passes, Fu Shen formally took up the post of Commander of the Beiyan Cavalry and was granted the title of Marquis of Jingning.

Given the merit Fu Shen had won working to save that desperate situation, it would have been fitting and proper for him to inherit the rank of duke, but Emperor Yuantai wavered, and in utter despite of the system passed down by his predecessors, not only permitted the third son of the Fu family to take his nephew's place in inheriting the title of Duke of Ying, but even gave his tacit consent to Fu Shen leaving the Duke of Ying Manor to reside elsewhere.

The discerning could all see that His Majesty was scared of the Fu family, worried lest that family should produce a Duke of Ying that would be "remembered throughout the ages."

But some people were doomed to sail against the current. In a few short years, while the Marquis of Jingning Fu Shen held command over the Beiyan Cavalry, he became the mainstay of Great Zhou in a single leap, refusing to pass on the responsibility he was called upon to fulfill, firmly occupying the position of a thorn in the flesh of the Tartars and the Zhe. The northern border had been peaceful in recent years, the people of the north living and working in peace and contentment; the best part of this was owed to his contribution. So long as Fu Shen remained in the army, even if he sat there unmoving and acted as a mascot, he was the greatest deterrent to the other peoples of the north.

While the common people blew hot air, the young gentleman at first listened as though it were a joke, but when he heard "the capital can sleep easy," all trace of a smile disappeared. Xiao Xun saw him lost in thought and quickly snatched up the teapot, pouring more tea for him. Deliberately interrupting, he said, "Gen… Young Master, we have to get back on the road in the afternoon. Take some more refreshment."

The gentleman came back to himself. He picked up his bowl and sipped the hot tea. The corners of his mouth lifted. Unexpectedly, there was a bit of ridicule in his smile. To himself, he feelingly remarked, "If these words spread, how many people will lose sleep?"

A customer next to them wearing a bamboo hat had been drawn in by their conversation. With a mysterious manner, he interjected, "People often say 'Utmost strength is followed by disgrace, utmost prosperity must lead to decline.' Don't you think that after so many years of doing battle in the north, the Marquis of Jingning perfectly suits these words? The famous generals of the past were either short-lived or solitary, because they were all stars of command come to the mortal world, their lives ruled by battle, unlike ordinary people. As I see it, the Marquis of Jingning was most likely born under the Qisha Star. His legs may be the consequence of too much murder..."

There was a crisp snap as the bowl in Xiao Xun's hand broke into several pieces. Blood dripped from the cracks between his fingers. Everyone looked in the direction of the sound. They were completely astounded. For a time, the inside of the tea kiosk was so quiet it was embarrassing.

"Your grip is too strong. I'll buy you an iron rice bowl next time to keep you from wrecking things." The young gentleman's expression hadn't changed one bit. Indifferently, he said, "Go dress those wounds yourself. Don't forget to pay for the damage."

Xiao Xun lowered his head and gave an assent.

The conversation that had been interrupted by this interlude could not continue. However colorful the speaker's description of immortals descending to earth, the speech had not been propitious. This time a tea bowl had broken; next time perhaps he would be surrounded and given a beating.

The only one who seemed to want to fan the flames was that out-of-place gentleman. Smiling, he said, "Interesting. According to what you say, friend, either a short life or solitude must fall upon such people. Since the Marquis of Jingning is already crippled, it would seem that he will be able to find himself a wife soon."

Xiao Xun was taken aback.

Someone banged on the table and leapt up in anger. "How can a good man have the misfortune to be without a wife?! A hero like the Marquis of Jingning can have any kind of woman he wants!"

"Right! Well said!" another person said in agreement. "And if he prefers men, there are plenty of good men out there waiting to marry him!"

The tea kiosk instantly erupted into earth-shaking laughter.

The previous dynasty had treated marriage between men as a refinement, so while the Great Zhou Dynasty prohibited common men from marrying each other, there was no such taboo for nobles; there was even precedent for the emperor conferring a marriage between men. As a notable wealthy bachelor of the capital, the Marquis of Jingning was the man of many noble girls' dreams. Yet time had dragged on, and no marriage had been settled for him. Hence some had guessed that he had unusual interests.

Once this romantic subject was mentioned, everyone became even more engrossed in conversation. The young gentleman did not interject again, only quietly listened to them discussing the Marquis of Jingning's whole life, a smile lingering at the corners of his lips the whole time, as if he were listening to an extremely interesting, extremely splendid story.

After a long silence, Xiao Xun prompted him, "Gen... Young Master, midday has passed. Shall we go?"

"Hm? We shall." The young gentleman extended a hand so Xiao Xun could help him up. He indolently cupped his hands in salute toward the crowd of traveling merchants. "Friends, I am in a hurry to reach the capital, so I will be going on ahead."

Everyone raised their hands to bid him farewell. Xiao Xun helped him into the carriage and lowered the curtains. When the carriage and the horses had trundled several hundred paces forward, Xiao Xun heard him say from inside, "Chongshan, give me the medicine."

"But didn't Mr. Du tell you to take the medicine an hour in advance?" Xiao Xun took an exquisite purse from his clothes. It contained an eggshell porcelain bottle. "We won't be entering the capital for another four hours."

"Don't talk nonsense." A hand reached out from under the curtains and snatched the porcelain bottle away. "The capital barracks are just up ahead. We can pull one over on these ordinary people, but we're sure to be recognized when we reach the capital barracks. Where will I find the time to start playing lame then?"

Xiao Xun muttered, "But, sir, you're actually lame to begin with..."

The sickly gentleman—that same Marquis of Jingning Fu Shen spoken of by everyone, whose "life was ruled by battle"—threw back his head and swallowed a finger-sized brown pill. Sneering, he said, "Chongshan, between a general with hope for recovery and a completely crippled invalid, which do you think is most likely to make people lose sleep?"

Xiao Xun said nothing more.

Fu Shen passed the porcelain bottle back to him and closed his eyes to await the paralysis about to spread through his limbs. Softly, he said, "Let's go."

CHAPTER TWO

EVENING, AT THE WESTERN OUTSKIRTS' CAPITAL BARRACKS, A hundred li outside the capital.

Zhong He, Commander of the Ruifeng Barracks, came out in person to greet their party. Xiao Xun stepped forward to salute him. Before he had completed his salute, Zhong He had already cast him aside. He leapt impatiently toward the carriage and lowered himself to make obeisance. "This subordinate, Commander of the Ruifeng Barracks Zhong He, pays his respects to General Fu!"

The Ruifeng Barracks ranked as the head of the five major capital barracks. Zhong He was a third class officer, already a very high position, but his attitude toward the Marquis of Jingning was respectful in the extreme.

A hand wrapped in bandages pushed open the hanging curtains. A dense medicinal odor slowly wafted out. Fu Shen wore no armor. He had only draped a robe over himself. His chest and arms were covered in bandages, and a blanket that hung down to his feet lay over his legs. His face was pale, his lips colorless, his hair loose. He seemed to be living on a single breath, so frail that a wind would knock him over.

Fu Shen nodded in greeting. "Commander Zhong, I trust you have been well since last we parted. Pardon me, *ahem*, I find it difficult to move and cannot rise to greet you."

Zhong He had already heard that he had been gravely injured and couldn't walk, but he hadn't expected his injuries to be *this* grave. Originally, he hadn't especially credited the rumors that "Fu Shen really is crippled," but seeing it with his own eyes, there was no room for disbelief. With Fu Shen's current appearance, never mind recovering his original condition, it seemed that even steadily living on for some years presented a problem.

Zhong He's vision darkened. He felt chilled from head to foot. In his sorrow, even the form of address he used changed. "Jingyuan, your injuries… You…"

Fu Shen heard his voice trail off with a tremor, the rims of his eyes turning red, as if Fu Shen hadn't simply been injured but was about to depart this mortal world the next moment. The corners of Fu Shen's lips twitched irresistibly. With a sigh, he said, "Thank you for your solicitude, Commander Zhong. It really is only my legs that are injured. It isn't fatal. Ah, Chongshan, go get a handkerchief, help Commander Zhong wipe away those tears."

Zhong He had served in the Yuanzhou army in his earlier years and had been acquainted with Fu Tingzhong and Fu Tingxin. Really he was halfway to being Fu Shen's family elder. Unfortunately, since assuming control over the Beiyan Cavalry, Fu Shen had always dawdled in the north, unwilling to return. His exchanges with old friends of his father's generation had declined by degrees.

But now, gravely injured, thin and pallid, his appearance made Zhong He all of a sudden put aside his position and remember only the high-spirited boy who in former years had always trailed after Fu Tingxin in the army. Further considering that he was alone in the world, with his parents dead and no children to look after him, without even an intimate beside him to assist him, with a disability that was unlikely to heal at such a young age, Zhong He felt sadness welling up. "It's all because of our incompetence. We couldn't prevent you from going out onto the battlefield back then, which has led to the current disaster. How will I face your father and your uncle in the netherworld?"

"Commander Zhong." Fu Shen, pained, leaned against the carriage wall. "Let us not mention events that have already passed. I am well, there is no need for you to be overly grieved."

From beginning to end, he had refused to call him "uncle." Zhong He was on the one hand dejected, and on the other hand felt that Fu Shen really was hardhearted. It was already late, and Fu Shen's party was in a hurry to enter the capital, so the two of them now bid farewell. The Beiyan riders changed horses and continued their gallop toward the capital, just barely entering the city before the gates were closed.

The last time Fu Shen had come back had been three months ago. The capital hadn't changed at all; as before, there were lights, liveliness, and bustle everywhere. The Beiyan soldiers traveling with him, however, went to the capital very rarely. They were constantly looking around as they walked, their progress slowing bit by bit. The sight of them walking down the street was truly too eye-catching. Fu Shen thought about it, then beckoned Xiao Xun over and quietly instructed, "Take me back to the manor now, then take them out for a stroll. No whoring, no gambling, no making trouble, and record the expenses on my account. Go on."

Xiao Xun opposed this without so much as thinking about it. "How could we!"

"Do as I say." Fu Shen's energy seemed to be waning. His voice was very low. But he spoke so insolently that it made one's hands itch to give him a beating. "Xiao Chongshan, if you keep hovering around me, you'll destroy my reputation—if I can't get married, you'll be the one acting the filial son at my bedside in the future."

"I..."

Xiao Xun couldn't win against this blackguard general. All he could do was give a sheepish assent.

Passing through a small alley, they came to a tidy street. This area was full of the mansions of the meritorious and wealthy, all lofty pavilions and vivid cinnabar paint, imposing in bearing, more tranquil than the houses of ordinary people. The Marquis of Jingning Manor was situated at the northeast corner. The old servant minding the house took down the threshold and welcomed the carriage through the gate. The servants waited in the courtyard. Seeing their master carried out on his subordinate's back, they all kept their hands to themselves and stood hesitating, not daring to step forward.

Fu Shen had moved out of the Duke of Ying Manor to live apart as soon as he had been made a marquis. He had no care at all for this big house. The servants were all weak and elderly ones that his stepmother Madam Qin had gathered from among her household and sent here for him to use; this had been four or five years ago. Fu Shen was often away, and there was no affection between him and the servants. Whenever he managed to return home for a brief stay, these people would be like mice seeing a cat, cowering away in the rear kitchen and the servants' quarters. Unless it was unavoidable, they wouldn't come out to obstruct his view.

Luckily, while the servants feared him, they hadn't neglected the housework. Xiao Xun carried Fu Shen to the bedroom on his back, asked the servants for hot water, took off his outer robe for him and wiped his hands and face clean, and helped him lie down in bed. Once he had been sorted out, Fu Shen destroyed the bridge behind him, driving Xiao Xun away. "Get busy. Have them leave a gate open for you tonight. There are side rooms all over the rear courtyard, sleep wherever you want. Forgive me for being an inattentive host."

Seeing an expression of weariness that could hardly be concealed on his face, Xiao Xun said nothing further. He tactfully left.

The pill from this afternoon had a powerful soporific effect. In order to deal with the crowd at the capital barracks, Fu Shen had held out, not sleeping on the road. Now at last he could hold out no longer. Practically as soon as Xiao Xun had shut the door and left, he dropped right into a dizzy dream.

The old servant listened at the window for a while with his ears pricked up, until he heard long, even breaths coming from inside, at which point, tiptoeing and clinging to the wall, he left the inner courtyard and had the cook prepare some easy-to-digest porridge and snacks and keep them warm on the stove for when their master awoke.

Fu Shen had traveled light and entered the capital openly. News quickly reached the palace and the ears of the courtiers. But presently there shouldn't be anyone coming to pay him a visit, so the old servant, after seeing off Xiao Xun and the others, shut the front gate, leaving only a side gate open. But when Fu Shen had been asleep less than two hours, all of a sudden, urgent and forceful knocking came from outside the Marquis of Jingning Manor.

The porter didn't dare to slight whoever this was. He hurried inside to report their presence. The old servant, the only one in the house who could make a decision, came in a rush, dragging his not very nimble legs. He looked out and was dumbfounded by the crowd outside, black-clothed men with swords hanging from their waists astride large horses. He quaked with terror. "Might… might I be so bold as to ask, gentlemen…"

The crowd parted automatically, and a tall man came through it, who stopped his horse in the light outside the shadow of the eaves. Instantly, the cloud pattern on his dark blue clothing flashed like flowing water; the celestial horses embroidered in silver on the back of his outer robe fluttered their wings as though ready to take flight. Moonlight and lantern light illuminated a beautiful face with smiling eyes and thin lips.

"No need to panic, grandfather." He nodded politely in greeting, but his tone and manner were indelibly proud and self-important. "The Feilong Guard's Imperial Investigator Yan Xiaohan, acting on orders from His Majesty, comes on purpose to engage a renowned physician to examine the Marquis of Jingning's injuries. Please go on ahead to announce my arrival."

The old servant couldn't tell apart the colors of official robes, but he had spent decades as a servant in two noble residences. He was very familiar with the name "Yan Xiaohan." His heart lurched. Stalling, he said, "Well, my master has had a long journey, and he is injured. He has already gone to sleep. Your Honor, why not—"

The Feilong Guard had always been peremptory in action, as was well known to the court and the commons, and rare were those who dared to stand in their way. Yan Xiaohan gave the servant a lofty glance from on high. The hand holding the reins was pale and gaunt. His sleeve was rolled back, revealing a small length of ice-cold wrought iron wrist guard. With a not-quite-smile, he asked, "What, are you very scared of me seeing your Lord Marquis, grandfather?"

He had it right.

This was no secret in the capital. Commander of the Left Shenwu Corps, the Feilong Guard's Imperial Investigator Yan Xiaohan, was the most blazingly authoritative minister the capital had seen in recent years. He was also the court's lackey, whom everyone wished to avoid—the emperor's eyes and ears. Even worse, he and the Marquis of Jingning were naturally opposed. They had been at odds for a long time, a pair of unshakable sworn enemies. It was said that a fight was sure to break out whenever they met; not even the emperor could stop them. Just this year, in morning court three months ago, due to differing views on the court dispatching army observers to all points, they had actually spent an hour deriding each other, without swear words, right in front of all the ministers, and had nearly come to blows there and then. The emperor had been so angry that he had pounded his inkstone and deducted half a year of each of their salaries, then quickly chased Fu Shen back to the northern border before finally letting it go.

Fortunes rise and fall. Now Fu Shen had returned to the capital in dejection, while Yan Xiaohan remained high-ranking and powerful. If he should harbor private resentment, how could their Lord Marquis take it in his condition!

The old servant was anxious. There was terror in his face. "I would not dare. It is only that our Lord Marquis really cannot bear any excitement. I hope Your Honor will make allowances."

As they spoke, Yan Xiaohan had surveyed the Marquis of Jingning Manor. The courtyard was tidy and desolate. Signs of the servants' care were apparent, but it still seemed deserted. He gave a veiled sigh. Yielding, he said, "I'm not here to make trouble for him… Forget it, no need for you to announce me, I'll just go in and have a look at him, then go."

However persistent the old servant might be, the weak cannot overpower the strong; he had to give way. Hoisting a lantern, he went on ahead as guide. Yan Xiaohan left the Feilong Guards who had accompanied him in the forecourt to avoid giving rise to any misunderstanding with his muster of forces, only bringing with him into the inner courtyard a spare and mild young man with the look of a scholar.

The enormous manor was absolutely empty. There were some trees growing in the courtyard. If it wasn't swept for a time, fallen leaves would cover the steps. It was as if the whole capital's bleak autumn mood had fallen in this courtyard. It was dark now. The other courtyards were silent and vacant, completely dark. Only in the windows of the main building did a pale gleam appear, giving it a rather dreary look.

Yan Xiaohan could restrain himself, but the young man walking beside him was already shaking his head repeatedly. Quietly, he asked, "With the Marquis of Jingning's high birth and great merit, how could his home be…"

The old servant felt this deeply. He heaved sigh upon sigh. "The Lord Marquis is always away defending the border. He doesn't come home for years, and there is no virtuous lady in the house to preside over the housework and manage the household.

There's only us old wretches left. We cannot ease the Lord Marquis's burdens..."

As he chattered on, he reached out to open the door of the main hall for the guests and asked the two of them to come and sit down. He lit all the lamps and ordered tea served. "Wait here a moment, gentlemen, I'll go speak to the Lord Marquis."

Hardly had he spoken than a dull thud suddenly came from the west inner room, as if something heavy had dropped from a height. The old servant's hand trembled. Before he could react, the Feilong Guard's Imperial Investigator, who had been standing beside him, moved like the wind. In the blink of an eye, he was inside the inner room.

CHAPTER THREE

FU SHEN'S SLEEP WASN'T VERY RESTFUL. THE MEDICINE HE HAD taken had countless side effects—palpitations, nightmares, shortness of breath, a feeling between sleeping and waking as if a big stone were pressing down on his chest, inability to move, dizziness and tinnitus—precisely the symptoms of a "ghost pressing on the bed" as spoken of among common people.

While Fu Shen himself hadn't woken up yet, his mind was clear. He silently slowed his breathing, trying to blink. Only when he could control his eyelids again did he press his hands against the bed, planning to sit up—

But he had forgotten that his legs were still paralyzed, utterly without sensation from the knee down. His arms and abdomen exerted force simultaneously, but because the strength he used was too great, his center of gravity was unsteady. He turned over and fell off the bed with a thump.

The bed in the bedroom wasn't particularly tall, but it had a footstool next to it. When Fu Shen fell, he first knocked against the footstool with his abdomen, then fell face up on the ice-cold tiles. The back of his head made a dull thump, hitting hard enough to make his vision darken and his ears buzz incessantly.

But before he could feel the dull ache, the bedroom door was kicked open. Someone charged inside and picked him up in his arms. This person's sleeves were still suffused with the chill of the autumn night, but his palms were burning hot.

Fu Shen was picked up, his head resting against this person's chest, his face pressed against a dark blue brocade official robe. The material felt soft and smooth. From the collar and sleeves came a mild and even agarwood scent. This seemed to be a person very familiar to him, suddenly become strange from too close proximity.

His scorching breath soaked through the thin fabric, so hot it made that person's body tense abruptly. Then he was put back on the bed. A slightly rigid hand pressed against his forehead. "Why is your breath so hot? Are you feverish?"

His blurred gaze and the pain he felt gradually clarified. Fu Shen recognized him. His first movement was to push that hand away. "What are you doing here?"

The old servant and the young Feilong Guard bringing up the rear heard this cold and harsh question as soon as they came in and came to a halt in unison, thinking to themselves that the rumors were indeed substantiated. Neither of these two was easy to deal with. If a fight started, they would first have to hold back Yan Xiaohan.

Yan Xiaohan closed his eyes and breathed. He didn't want to pick a quarrel with Fu Shen. Stiffly, he said, "You're about to be cooked. Get up and drink something. I'll have someone feel your pulse and prescribe additional medicine."

Fu Shen, eyes closed, listlessly responded, "No need to take the trouble. Let's move on to business. Lord Yan has graced my humble abode in the middle of the night. What did you wish to see me about?"

Yan Xiaohan ignored him. Without leave, he went to the table, picked up a tea kettle, and poured half a cup of completely cold tea. His expression immediately turned grim. He glanced coldly at the old servant. "Is this the quality of your service?"

Pained, Fu Shen said, "That's enough…"

Yan Xiaohan said, "The Lord Marquis's body is a precious one. How can he receive such lax treatment from you? If you continue to be this careless, do not blame me for reporting it to His Majesty so he can dispense punishment."

Fu Shen's fingers, fallen at his side, twitched imperceptibly.

How could the old servant endure such a fright? He quickly knelt and begged for mercy. Fu Shen truly couldn't take the disturbance. He yielded at last, saying, "Fine, thank you for disciplining my servant, Lord Yan."

These words sounded as though they were mocking him for being a busybody. Yan Xiaohan took this opportunity to disengage. He icily spat out the words "Bring fresh tea," then at last magnanimously allowed the servant to leave.

Only three people remained in the room. Yan Xiaohan stood by the bed, head bent to look at Fu Shen. The bedside lamp wasn't bright enough. Half of Fu Shen's face was plunged into shadow, making its outlines appear especially deep and sharp. He was truly skin and bones, and yet at the same time, also truly unrivaled in loveliness—so lovely it was even a little dazzling.

Yan Xiaohan smiled. There was very false sincerity in that smile. "The emperor is thinking of the Lord Marquis. His Majesty heard that you had returned to the capital and particularly ordered me to bring someone here to feel your pulse."

Eyes half-closed, Fu Shen said weakly, "Pass on my thanks to His Majesty for his care. Go back and report that I am well. I have already been treated by the Beiyan Army's military doctor. There is no need to trouble the imperial physicians."

The word in the capital was that the Marquis of Jingning was headstrong and self-willed, impervious to persuasion or threats. This was true indeed.

Shen Yice, the Feilong Guard's military doctor, who had accompanied Yan Xiaohan, stepped forward. Out of a physician's kindheartedness, he was planning to counsel this stubborn general on behalf of his superior. But Yan Xiaohan raised a hand to stop him, indicating for him to wait. The expression that inadvertently appeared on his face looked as though he were dealing with some troublesome ferocious beast.

"His Majesty is concerned about the Lord Marquis's injuries. I have come here today to set His Majesty's mind at ease." Yan Xiaohan kept his gaze fixed on Fu Shen's profile, biting off his words crisply and slowly. "To gain the Lord Marquis's trust, this military doctor of the Beiyan Army must have superb medical skills. I have no fear of a misdiagnosis. It is only that the Lord Marquis's injuries are of utmost importance. There isn't any harm in getting some other doctors to have a look, don't you think?"

Fu Shen raised his eyelids, meeting his eyes.

When Yan Xiaohan met that gaze like cold iron, he felt a chill at heart. He suddenly had a strange impression, as though Fu Shen were looking through him to fix his eyes coldly on another person.

After a moment, the impervious Marquis of Jingning lowered his eyelids, casually gathered up his messy hair, and feebly extended a hand, indicating for Yan Xiaohan to help him up. "Since you're already here… then I'll have to trouble you. Go on."

Shen Yice startled, but Yan Xiaohan didn't seem to notice anything amiss. To be able to order the Feilong Guard's Imperial Investigator around like his own maid—Fu Shen might well have been the first.

Yan Xiaohan helped Fu Shen up and turned to sit at the bedside. Afraid that the headboard would rub against his injuries, he braced an arm behind his back, distantly encircling his shoulders to keep him from sliding down. Precisely because of this movement, Fu Shen's hair fell loose. Yan Xiaohan pulled him close and tucked the strands of hair that had fallen before his eyes behind his ears. Like this, Fu Shen ended up mostly in his arms. The Marquis of Jingning, probably thinking that this cushion was softer than the headboard, didn't bother about how repulsive Yan Xiaohan himself was. Shifting and wriggling, he found himself a comfortable position and lay still.

For a pair of "sworn enemies," this posture unavoidably seemed too intimate. Luckily Shen Yice's only concern was for Fu Shen's injuries. He didn't notice how the Imperial Investigator whose name could make all the officials blanch considerately pulled up the quilt to bundle the Marquis of Jingning entirely, while the Marquis of Jingning relaxed his tense back under the quilt and leaned his whole weight on Yan Xiaohan.

Fu Shen was in fact running a terrible fever, and he had just taken a fall. Everywhere hurt. He wasn't actually such a fragile person, but Yan Xiaohan, having seen his fill of "willow branch trembling in the wind" officials and nobles, had probably taken him for another easily broken vase and was treating him accordingly.

"The Lord Marquis is injured. Your constitution isn't what it once was. You must take care not to get chilled, and you must not consume cold or otherwise stimulating foods. Your bedroom must be protected against cold and damp. The weather is growing colder. A brazier and scenting frame ought to be lit early." Shen Yice finished taking his pulse, let go of Fu Shen's wrist, and added, "Pardon the offense, Lord Marquis, I need to have a look at your leg injuries."

Yan Xiaohan silently lifted the quilt and rolled up his pant legs for him. As he did so, he couldn't avoid touching him. As if he had noticed something, Fu Shen shot him a strange look.

He remembered very well that Yan Xiaohan didn't get sick at the sight of blood. Why was he shaking?

Though Fu Shen couldn't feel pain now, Shen Yice was still as gentle as possible. "The external wounds have healed very well. Your fever comes from being affected by the cold. The Lord Marquis's most serious injuries are to the kneecaps and veins. It will take several years of slowly building back your strength before there can be some hope of recovery, but… I'm afraid that in the future you will have some difficulty standing and walking."

Yan Xiaohan rolled Fu Shen's pant legs back down for him and bundled him in the quilt. Shen Yice put away his wrist cushion. "I will write out an additional prescription for the Lord Marquis. First we will treat your cold. As for the wounds to your legs, continue treatment according to the methods of the Beiyan Army's doctor. Permit me to consult with the imperial physicians and court physicians when I return so as to draw on the collective pool of wisdom. Perhaps we will be able to come up with a better method."

Fu Shen was nodding, then suddenly sucked in a breath. "*Hss*… gently!"

"Hm?" said Shen Yice.

"… It's nothing." Fu Shen clenched his teeth and flexed his shoulders, which Yan Xiaohan had been gripping hard enough to hurt. He nodded and expressed his thanks. "I appreciate you taking the trouble, Mr. Shen."

"Not at all." Shen Yice sidestepped this gratitude. "My medical skills are inadequate. I was unable to ease the Lord Marquis's burdens. I am truly ashamed."

"You mustn't be like this, Mr. Shen." Fu Shen was the most carefree one among them. "I'm well aware of the condition of my injuries. It remains only to do what one can and leave the rest to heaven."

"Set your mind at ease, Lord Marquis," Yan Xiaohan said abruptly. "Heaven always leaves a way out. There has to be a way to heal your injuries." Then, to Shen Yice, he added, "Give the prescription to the Marquis Manor's servants, tell them decoct the medicine. If they lack any ingredients, they can send someone out to buy them, and if they can't find them, they can come to my manor to get them."

Shen Yice saw that the two of them seemed to have something to say to each other, so he saluted Fu Shen and went to follow his lord's orders.

Yan Xiaohan helped him to lie back down, expression unfathomable. His features were naturally gentle and sincere.

Nothing in his face showed that he was the one who had just squeezed the firm and unwavering General Fu hard enough to make him yelp.

At last, only the two of them remained in the room. Yan Xiaohan pulled over a round stool and sat far away from him. "Your legs—"

"Didn't we just discuss that? It is what it is." Fu Shen extended a hand and interrupted him. "Pour me a cup of tea."

Yan Xiaohan frowned. "It's cold."

"I'll take it anyway. Or am I supposed to die of thirst?" Fu Shen said. "Similarly, even with broken legs, I still have to live. Am I going to hang myself over such a thing?"

Yan Xiaohan had no answer to this. All he could do was spill out the half cup of old tea and pour a fresh cup, then pass it to him. "His Majesty had his doubts. That is why he deliberately sent me to bring someone to examine your injuries."

"Then he can set his mind at ease now," said Fu Shen.

"Not necessarily," Yan Xiaohan said bluntly. "You're still breathing, aren't you?"

Fu Shen looked at him with a *you're goading me again* expression.

"I keep thinking that none of this is real. Do you really not have some backup plan?" Yan Xiaohan asked. "You didn't release false information?"

Fu Shen asked in turn, "Why would you think that?"

Yan Xiaohan candidly answered, "Because you have a clever face. You don't look like you would do such a stupid thing."

"It's true." Fu Shen shook his head and drank the tea unhurriedly. "The spear in the open is easily dodged, the hidden arrow is hard to avoid. If you think I can't be taken in, then you must consider me much too miraculous."

Yan Xiaohan hadn't expected his self-assessment to be so low. He was momentarily startled.

Serving in the army since his youth, accomplishing a series of illustrious military exploits, Fu Shen's existence seemed to be for the purpose of smashing the concept of "impossible." In the hearts of many, the Marquis of Jingning and the Beiyan Cavalry were already an unbeatable legend. This vision struck too deep a chord in the heart; even Yan Xiaohan himself had such an illusion.

But Fu Shen was only an ordinary man. He didn't have three heads and six arms, copper skin and iron bones. A flesh-and-blood body couldn't resist a boulder falling out of the sky.

"Do you know, on the road back to the capital, I talked to some people in a tea kiosk. I heard them say that there's a ballad going around in the capital, called 'With Commander Fu in the north, the capital can sleep easy,'" Fu Shen said. "It's ridiculous. I've spent seven or eight years at the northern border. I thought I had a distinguished career, protecting the border and bringing peace to the people. I was so arrogant I was about to forget my own name. Only at the end did I learn that it wasn't only the Tartar and the Zhe who had been losing sleep because of me. Even *that gentleman* couldn't sleep easy because of the trouble I've been making…"

Yan Xiaohan said, "Since you understand it all now, then why not simply surrender your authority, quietly go home to retire and farm? Isn't being an idle nobleman far better than going into battle or intriguing in the capital?"

"That's just about enough, now." Fu Shen sneered. "Is this your first day knowing me? I thought that at any rate we had exchanged our inner thoughts despite being little acquainted, yet you're trying this ploy on me?"

He quietly continued, "The Eastern Tartars won't give up their designs, the Zhe Clan watches us covetously, and how many people at court have had their vision obscured by years of peace? If I go now, who will come to take over the Beiyan Cavalry? Who will be willing to haggle with the court for the sake of the border army? When the enemy is at the gates, won't the misfortune fall on the common soldiers, the innocent people?"

"What's that got to do with you?"

Fu Shen abruptly raised his eyes. He seemed not to have expected Yan Xiaohan to turn hostile this fast.

Yan Xiaohan coldly said, “His Majesty fears you, the ministers suspect you, the ignorant masses only follow the trend. Now that you’re like this, who still thinks of you? You yourself hardly have a place to shelter, yet you still have room in your heart to embrace the nation? Don’t you think that’s ridiculous, General Fu?”

These words were cold and heartless, profoundly offensive, but contrary to Yan Xiaohan’s expectations, Fu Shen didn’t retort.

Yan Xiaohan watched his profile, eyes cast down and deep in thought, and suddenly had a distinct realization that the youthful brashness, the keen and dazzling edge that had once been Fu Shen’s were now continuously growing faint.

Pain, hardship and experience, or something else… were thoroughly, utterly wearing them away.

There was a distance between them, but their manners were much more open than before, nearly amounting to “laying one’s heart bare.” The two of them in fact did not get along, but they were far from being unable to stand each other as the rumors in the outside world had it. They had met as teenagers, and being so-called “sworn enemies” was only them going with the flow of a misunderstanding. After all, one was a powerful official holding military authority, and one was a highly trusted aide of the emperor. If they got on too well, it would have made people suspicious.

The playacting of a tacit understanding and the intimate exchanges amid their slight acquaintance admittedly did away with quite a bit of trouble, yet this had also metamorphosed certain disagreements into chasms that lay between the two of them.

Many successive generations of the Fu family had been noble and meritorious. The men of Fu Shen’s father’s and grandfather’s generation had all died on the battlefield. Duty and loyalty were practically his nature, carved into his bones and blood. Yan Xiaohan, meanwhile, was of humble birth and had stepped on countless people to climb to his current position. He obeyed only the emperor's word, disregarded principle, had no bottom line; he absolutely couldn't comprehend these "men of integrity" who would undertake a career where they were sure to lose, would even practically rush to lay themselves down.

In the end, they weren't traveling the same path. The two of them had perhaps long anticipated this. But they hadn't thought that the clash would come so suddenly, nor that such a high price would have to be paid.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE DUKE OF YING MANOR.

The autumn day was cool, but inside it was warm and cozy. The long couch was by the window. On a small table, all types of pastries and fresh fruit were laid. A half-grown boy with one leg crossed over the other had his head down, pretending to read the volume in his hands. He hadn't turned a page in ages. The level below was full of standing maids, who occasionally exchanged looks, or pouted, or made veiled hand signals, their faces expressive; they were at no point well-behaved. The teenage boy had just been stirred to action by these coquettish glances when a young maid suddenly ran in from outside and crisply said, "Madam is coming."

Everyone's expressions turned grave. All the maids obediently stood still. The teenager's leg stopped twitching, and his bones were no longer soft. Holding the book in both hands, he swiftly twisted into an appearance of propriety. By the time the splendidly dressed lady came in, what she saw was a classic portrait of a "Student Hard at His Studies."

Madam Qin, leaning on the arm of a maid, sat down on the couch. The teenager stood up to salute her and warmly called out "Mother," then sat next to her. Madam Qin took his hand

and said with displeasure, "It's dark, why haven't the lamps been lit? Take care not to damage your eyes."

Hearing this, the maids immediately lit the lanterns and brought fresh tea. The teenager carelessly fabricated, "I was so focused on reading that I didn't notice it. Mother, what brings you here?"

Madam Qin said, "I went to the forecourt to see your Third Uncle and discuss some things, and on the way back I was passing by here, so I came to have a look at you. It will save you a trip to see me this evening."

The teenager's eyes turned. "Is it concerning my big brother?"

Madam Qin looked askance at him. "Clever, aren't you. You never focus on your studies. All you do is pick up gossip."

"It's all over the capital, is there any need for me to go deliberately picking it up?" The teenager sneered. "He got his legs broken and couldn't stick it out at the border, so he's had to come back to the capital to retire, right?"

Hearing this, Madam Qin pursed her lips and pressed his hand heavily, but she didn't reproach him, only instructed the servants attending on them, "Withdraw, all of you, I need to talk to Ya'er alone."

The servants all bowed and left the room. Two upper maids remained in the corridor, while the rest went into the courtyard to amuse themselves. All the maids who looked after the young master were pampered, pretty, and pleasant. Quite a few among them were naïve and simple-minded women with chivalry in their hearts. Two who were on good terms got together to whisper to each other. When they came to what they had heard in the young master's room, one of them indignantly said, "It's no wonder the first gentleman wants to live outside. If he was at home, who knows what state that lady would torment him into."

The other one said with a smile, "Not necessarily. You wouldn't know it—when he was at home, whenever our Madam and the young master saw him, they were like mice who had seen a cat. He looks like a promising young man, all orchids and jade trees, but his temper is like a tempest. Now that's a real man who can hold up heaven and earth."

"The first gentleman is a young hero, but he can't even be mentioned in his own home. Our young master has no conscience. He distances himself from his own big brother, only listens to the insinuations of those malicious little people…"

The other maid lightly smacked her on the back of the hand. "What do you know? They don't have the same mother. How can he count as 'his own big brother'? Reasonably speaking, only the second young mistress, that's Princess Qi now, can call him her big brother. As for our young master and the crown prince's First Consort, in his heart they're three thousand li behind his cousins."

The late Duke of Ying Fu Tingzhong's first wife had died young, leaving behind one son, Fu Shen, and one daughter, Fu Ling. At seventeen, Fu Ling had married the emperor's son Prince Qi, becoming his first wife. The Duke's second wife, Madam Qin, had two daughters and one son. Her eldest daughter Fu Ting had gone into the palace and been selected as the crown prince's consort. Her young son Fu Ya and her younger daughter Fu Xi, still of tender years, were both at home being raised by their mother.

When Madam Qin had married in, Fu Shen had already been old enough to understand things. He hadn't been close to her. After Fu Ya was born, the two of them had become even more estranged. They were limited by their positions; it was hard to avoid a conflict between a stepmother and the eldest son of the first wife. After all, with Fu Shen ahead of him, the title wouldn't go to Fu Ya in the future.

But before Madam Qin could carry out any little tricks, Fu Tingzhong had been assassinated at the northern frontier. At the time, in order to win over officials of outstanding merit, Emperor Yuantai had been treating military officers quite preferentially, so he had decided not to pass on the rank to the next generation, making an exception to decree that Fu Tingxin would inherit the title of Duke of Ying. Later, Fu Tingxin passed away, the military situation at the border was critical, and Fu Shen rushed out onto the battlefield before the mourning period had passed. The title of Duke of Ying had remained vacant. The Ministry of Rites, in accordance with Emperor Yuantai's hints, had let the Third Master, Fu Tingyi, inherit the position. When Fu Shen returned to court after winning merit, he had instead been made Marquis of Jingning.

Using this as a pretext, Madam Qin, citing the fact there were now two titles in the family and "a tall tree catches the wind," had made the suggestion that Fu Shen should live apart.

Fu Shen knew what she was planning. She was simply after the position and wanted to elbow him out. Madam Qin was shortsighted, but the new Duke of Ying Fu Tingyi thought further ahead. The Fu family's true asset wasn't the title of Duke, but the Beiyan Cavalry. But three generations of the Fu family had had a close connection to the Beiyan Army; if this went on, the Beiyan Army would sooner or later change its name to the Fu Family Corps—what would the people of the empire think of that, and what would the one sitting on the throne think of it?

So it was better to fall back in order to advance. In the future, Fu Shen would inevitably hold the Beiyan Cavalry firmly in his hand, while the Duke of Ying Manor, or rather, the colossus of the Fu family, could no longer be tied to the Beiyan Army.

After weighing up the relative merits, the present situation had come about: the Beiyan Army Commander, the Marquis of Jingning Fu Shen, had set up housekeeping on his own and had practically no contact with the Duke of Ying Manor; the Fu family's Third Master Fu Tingyi had inherited the title and was acting the idle noble, while Madam Qin lived at the Ducal Manor with her children, only waiting for Fu Ya to come of age to request that he be made heir to the title.

Neither mother nor son had any fond feelings toward Fu Shen. For Madam Qin it was because of her guilty conscience;

she couldn't stand to see him succeed, lest he turn around and bite back at her. Fu Ya probably thought that since Fu Shen hadn't offered up the position of heir to him with both hands on his knees, that meant that he naturally owed him.

Inside the principal room, Madam Qin put on a stern expression and chided, "That mouth of yours. It's one thing to talk at home, but when you're outside, you must on no account carelessly wag your tongue."

"Mother—" Fu Ya tossed a fruit into his mouth. Drawling, he said discontentedly, "He's already left the Fu family, why should I be afraid of him?"

"What do you know? You're talking drivel, anyway." Madam Qin lightly slapped his leg. "His parents' memorial tablets are both here. He's only living apart. How can he not be a member of the Fu family anymore? After all, he is your older brother and he has occupied a high position from a young age. While his temper has been somewhat restrained in recent years, in earlier years he was an unforgiving fiend. Be cautious, don't fall prey to him."

Fu Ya snorted indifferently.

Madam Qin said, "In a few years, we'll be asking for you to be made the heir. Your Third Uncle favors Fu Shen. He's just waiting for you to slip up. You must not put a step out of place now, have you got that?"

She lowered her voice. "Put up with it for now, my son, and one day the title of Duke and all the family property will be yours. No one will be able to fight you for it, not even Fu Shen... He will only be able to stand by and watch."

Madam Qin's voice was almost low enough to be a whisper. Fu Ya's heart jumped. He raised his head. "Mother..."

"Mother has a way." Madam Qin tightly squeezed his hand. "Set your mind at ease."

* * *

The Eastern Palace.

The crown princess Lady Cen faced a bronze mirror as she removed her hairpins and earrings. The attending maid combing her hair bent down and quietly said into her ear, "My Lady, the Duke of Ying Manor's Madam Qin sent a servant today to pay respects to First Consort Fu. They sat together in her hall and talked for a long time."

The crown princess's hand paused. She thought briefly, then understood. Smiling, she said, "As she likes. I've heard that the Marquis of Jingning has returned to the capital. Madam Qin must be feeling rather uncomfortable, so she's in a hurry to ingratiate herself with our Prince."

The maid was a close confidante who had accompanied her as part of her dowry. Hearing this, she said uncomprehendingly, "But isn't the Marquis of Jingning..."

"He's crippled, but he has yet to fall," Lady Cen said. "The Marquis of Jingning is famous among the people, and his prestige at court is extremely high. He also holds the military authority of the northern frontier. Even if he hands it over, the Beiyan Army will be full of his former direct subordinates. He will still be able to summon hundreds with one cry. To be disrespectful, never mind Madam Qin, even our Prince must give way to him somewhat."

The crown princess Lady Cen's father was the military commissioner of Jingchu, Cen Hongfang; there was some friendship between him and the Duke of Ying Manor. Lady Cen had been picking up subtle influences from him since she was little; her ability to read a situation was no less than a man's. Had Fu Shen not gone to the northern frontier, perhaps he would have been among the candidates to become Cen Hongfang's son-in-law. Dismissing the topic of temperament, the Marquis of Jingning's conduct was extremely upright, and he was young and a war hero, covered in military honors, enchanting to countless young mistresses waiting to be betrothed.

"I remember that First Consort Fu had a little brother," said

Lady Cen. "They were going to request that he be made the Duke of Ying's heir in a couple of years?"

"Yes, My Lady."

"Our Prince originally had his eye on the Marquis of Jingning's full-blood younger sister, the current Princess Qi, and sent someone to consult the Fu family's views in private. At the time, Second Master Fu was still head of household at the Duke of Ying Manor. Because this was his eldest niece, he couldn't very well make an arbitrary decision himself. He went to ask the Marquis of Jingning about it." She slowly recalled the rumors in the capital at the time. She stroked her temples. All of a sudden, a faint, entirely causeless grief welled up in her heart.

"The Marquis of Jingning was about the same age First Consort Fu's little brother is now. When he heard that his sister was unwilling, he refused the marriage without another word. They're all that resolute in the Fu family. Even if it meant offending His Highness, he still wanted to find his sister a marriage to her satisfaction."

Princess Qi Fu Ling had such a good big brother; it really did make a person envious.

"For the sake of the position of heir, Madam Qin abandoned all face. She sent her daughter into the palace and split up her family, made an unsightly ruckus. And what came of it? The Marquis of Jingning's sister is the grand and glorious Princess Qi, while Madam Qin has to rely on First Consort Fu when she needs anything, and rack her brains keep clear of me, like a thief." Sneering, Lady Cen continued, "If her son had half the Marquis of Jingning's willingness to take on responsibility, First Consort Fu would never have ended up submitting to humiliation at my hands, cowering and fawning."

The maid knew that the words "Marquis of Jingning" had touched a remote regret in the crown princess's and felt that the crown princess was unusually acerbic tonight. She gave a firm assent. "Well… My Lady, should we distance her from His Highness for the next few days?"

Lady Cen looked into the bronze mirror briefly, muttering to herself. A long moment later, she waved a hand and said, "No need. None of them are worth their salt, anyway. Even if His Highness shows them favor, it will all go to waste."

* * *

Night, inside the Eastern Palace's Chunfang Pavilion.

The crown prince Sun Yunliang was for once staying the night. First Consort Fu came forward to help him remove his outer robe and attend on the crown prince as he cleaned himself up. Though she was as solicitous as usual, there was a persistent gloom between her brows.

To Sun Yunliang's eyes, the sorrowing beauty with her shapely brows slightly knit had a particular romantic air to her. He couldn't resist coming over to embrace her and provide his attentions. When the clouds had cleared and the rain had ceased, he languorously asked, "What is it? What troublesome matter has you so worried?"

Fu Ting quickly stood and knelt by the bed to ask forgiveness. "Today my mother sent a servant to tell me about a certain matter. I was scared out of my wits. Because of this, I have been a little distracted. I beg Your Highness's forgiveness."

The crown prince pulled her back into his arms. "I pardon you. What was this matter? Tell me about it."

Fu Ting's brow instantly cleared. It was as if she had beheld a savior. Her eyes were full of reverence and trust, making the crown prince feel even more complacent. She drew close to the crown prince's ear, her breath delicate as an orchid's scent. "I won't conceal it from you, Your Highness. This matter concerns my older brother, the Marquis of Jingning Fu Shen…"

CHAPTER FIVE

THIS YEAR, IT SEEMED, WAS DESTINED TO BE TURBULENT.

Near the end of the year, following the major case of the attack on the Eastern Tartar diplomatic mission that had shaken the court and the commons, yet another rumor concerning the Beiyan Commander spread among the high officials and nobles in the city like a single flame growing into a prairie fire—

The Marquis of Jingning Fu Shen had the Longyang proclivity[1]. He had peach-parting, cut-sleeve tendencies.

The emergence of this news was odd, but thinking about it carefully, there was much in it to be considered. Moreover, people were never afraid of using the most obscene conjectures to supplement the "truth." It wasn't long before vivid accounts of Fu Shen's love affairs since he had joined the army spread widely through the homes of the nobles and admirable subjects, even becoming a topic of idle chat at some people's tea and dinner tables.

In Great Zhou, preferring men wasn't especially far out of bounds, and the people of the times were unusually tolerant of it. But for such a thing to manifest in a general holding military authority was no longer as simple as a mere "hobby."

The previous dynasty's dynastic name had been "Yue." It had reigned for over a century, producing during that time a romantic emperor who had gone down in history; his posthumous title was Suzong.

Before ascending to the throne, Suzong had favored a beautiful woman with the surname Han. After ascending to the throne, he had not only made Lady Han his Imperial Consort, he had also ennobled her father and all her brothers. Imperial Consort Han's little brother was named Han Cang. History recorded that he had been "pretty and graceful, with a face like a beautiful woman's, with a character like bright pearls and fine jade." Because of his big sister, Han Cang joined the Luanyi Guard. Once, while escorting the emperor's carriage during an outing, he appeared before the emperor. Suzong fell in love with him at first sight. After returning to the palace, he could not forget him. In despite of social conventions and tradition, he had brought Han Cang into the palace. Forget merely granting him imperial favor—he created a special title outside the ranks of the consorts and concubines, Imperial Companion, equal in consequence to the Imperial Consort, making the sister and brother both attend upon the same man.

The Great Yue Dynasty had no precedent for any such thing. From the court to the common people, no one was unshaken. The civil and military officials strenuously admonished him to no end, only wishing to line up to strike their heads to death on the floor before the imperial hall.

While Suzong was a romantic, leaving aside that identifier, first and foremost he was an emperor, the head of a nation. He could not permit himself to become the target of a crowd of officious fatheads' ridicule over a small personal matter. In his anger, this rather crafty emperor issued a decree permitting high-ranking scholar officials to take male concubines, while officials of the sixth rank and above, as well as nobles and imperial kinsmen, could marry male wives, equal to first wives.

When a superior develops a hobby, his subordinates must develop a passion. Once this exception had been made, while those waiting to see what happened made up the majority of the court, many scholars extolled being a cut-sleeve as a matter of refinement, so the common people followed suit in droves. From then on, relationships between men flourished unceasingly. Suzong reigned for nearly thirty years, and none of the ministers dared to present a memorial to the throne requesting that this decree be rescinded.

It was only when the previous dynasty was in an increasingly rapid decline that the then-reigning Xuanzong—feeling that the prevalence of relationships between men ran counter to heavenly principles and tradition, resulting in a stagnating population, a sharp drop in the number of strong workers, difficulty in sowing and reaping—at last issued a decree prohibiting marriages between common men. An imperial order sent male concubines back to their homes, returned their indentures to them, and re-enrolled them in the household register. But there were still exceptions to the decree. Xuanzong not only permitted men who had the status of first wife to remain in their husband's family, he deliberately issued a benevolent decree: all officials of the sixth rank or above, dukes and marquises and imperial kinsmen, if they were willing to marry a man as their first wife, were permitted to submit a memorial to the throne for a special dispensation granting their marriage.

This benevolent decree became Xuanzong's secret weapon to check powerful ministers and his own family members. For nobles inheriting a title especially, taking a man to wife meant having no direct descendants. If there was no one to inherit the title at their death, it would revert to the court.

Following the end of the Yue Dynasty, owing to the outstanding efficacy of this bloodless killing blade, it had continued in use to this day. And since Great Zhou had been established, about a dozen courtiers had had marriages granted to them by the emperor, all people with great authority and vast influence.

The Beiyan Army's Commander, the Marquis of Jingning, the eldest son of the Duke of Ying by his formal wife—under any guise, what he would fear most was being smeared with the word "cut-sleeve."

So many people had their gazes fixed menacingly on him, and the emperor was fretting about having no excuse to take over the military power he held—why, at precisely this critical moment, would this rumor spread?

Fu Shen was living quietly at home, paying no visits to family or old friends. Naturally he had no way of knowing about these rumors. His subordinates, meanwhile, due to having heard too much unreliable gossip about the Marquis of Jingning, from extravagant embellishments to monstrous tales, had long ago learned to take rumors in stride.

Had they had any political acuteness, none of them would have allowed the rumors to spread rampantly like this.

The plotters were sharpening their knives, while the one at the center of the plot had his eyes and ears closed, utterly ignorant.

By the time Yan Xiaohan, who was slightly more alert, heard this rumor from the mouth of a Feilong Guard, his heart instantly jumped. His intuition told him this was going to be bad.

That night, he received no answer from Fu Shen. Under the circumstances, the most resolute of people couldn't help wavering. Yan Xiaohan had the upper hand, but sadly he wasn't at all pleased.

Emperor Yuantai hadn't permitted the Feilong Guard to take over the case of the attack on the Eastern Tartar diplomatic mission. All Yan Xiaohan could do was choose to investigate in private. The doubts in his heart hadn't disappeared. Though Fu Shen had said it was Yan Xiaohan having too high an opinion of him, a person who could leave a battlefield in one piece falling into an ambush like this was like a duck inexplicably drowning to death in a bucket of water. Never mind that this ambush was full of peculiarities. Even with the Feilong Guard's methods, he had to this day been unable to discover the mastermind.

Fu Shen's attitude had made him suspect that there was perhaps some secret behind this case, and Yan Xiaohan needed the truth behind it.

It had nothing to do with fairness, and it wasn't for the sake of morality. It was because he wielded a monstrous knife of unparalleled sharpness on behalf of the emperor. He wanted to get a clear look at the turbulent currents hidden beneath the surface so he could control where the blade struck rather than have it backlash against him or be sucked in by the hidden current.

Past emperors of the present dynasty had attached great importance to the imperial guard. Within the imperial city were the Left and Right Jinwu, Luanyi, Jiumen, Xiaoqi, and Baotao Guards, ten in all, known as the Ten South Yamen Guards. Within the palace were the Left and Right Yulin, Shenshu, and Shenwu Corps, six in all, dedicated bodyguards, known as the Six North Yamen Corps. Outside of these, the Feilong Guard supervised the officials and patrolled the borders. Its commanding officer was an Upper Third Rank Imperial Investigator, with standing to present memorials in secret in His Majesty's presence.

The commander of each corps of the North Yamen was part of the Feilong Guard, and Yan Xiaohan held the position of Imperial Investigator, above all the commanders. In terms of real authority, he was the leader of the North Yamen Imperial Guard.

The one who had brought the rumor that "The Marquis of Jingning is a cut-sleeve" into the imperial guard was the commander of the Left Shenshu Corps, Wei Xuzhou. The Wei family was numerous, with many marriage alliances. They could find relations among the greater part of the nobles in the capital. General Wei was even more richly endowed by nature. There wasn't another man in the imperial guard to rival him in enthusiasm for acting as matchmaker or passing along gossip.

It was well known among the Feilong Guard as well that Yan

Xiaohan and Fu Shen didn't get along. Taking pleasure in another's misfortune, Wei Xuzhou said, "This rumor is too nauseating. Look at how lofty and virtuous the Marquis of Jingning is normally. Here I was thinking he would have only his own hand for company for the rest of his life, hahaha..."

Yan Xiaohan's brow furrowed deeply. "Where did you hear that?"

General Wei said, "My Second Uncle's wife's younger sister's husband's cousin... the Marquis of Liu'en's wife, that is. He has an unwed daughter and took a fancy to the Marquis of Jingning, so he asked around in private. That's when he learned that there was such a secret."

Yan Xiaohan put a hand to his forehead. He had no desire to speak to him.

"Your Honor," Wei Xuzhou said curiously, circling him twice, "it's the Marquis of Jingning who has such a hobby, and he isn't fretting, so why are you fretting on his behalf?"

Fishy. Too fishy.

A man who hadn't had an unlucky turn in several years was suddenly so unfortunate that he could get something stuck in his teeth while drinking cold water—what had Fu Shen done to enrage man and heaven that demons of all descriptions were bringing out their numerous methods to scheme against him like a swarm of bees?

"There's something off about this. Wei-xiong, please go investigate where this information about the Marquis of Jingning being a cut-sleeve came from—" Before Yan Xiaohan could finish speaking, a blue-clothed young eunuch suddenly came into the outer hall. This was the disciple of Eunuch Tian, the eunuch who took notes during audiences with His Majesty. The two of them quickly cut their conversation short and stepped forward to receive instructions. The young eunuch said, "His Majesty summons Lord Yan to present himself at Yangxin Hall."

Hearing that he had business, Wei Xuzhou was about to step aside conscientiously, but Yan Xiaohan motioned to him behind his back as he said, "Wait a moment, Eunuch, I have some official business to discuss with General Wei."

The young eunuch said unfeelingly, "These are His Majesty's verbal instructions. Lord Yan, are you really going to make His Majesty wait for you?"

A trace of a fleeting smile appeared at the corners of Yan Xiaohan's lips, his most common expression, which was gentle but also made him look as though he were about to eat someone.

"I am the Imperial Investigator of the Feilong Guard. Each and every one of my actions serves the emperor. What you've said puts me in a difficult spot, Eunuch."

The eunuch had only been blustering. When Yan Xiaohan smiled at him like this, he instantly recalled the frightening legends in the palace concerning this Imperial Investigator of the Feilong Guard. His expression changed dramatically. He barely managed to keep calm. Giving way, he said, "That being the case, do as you wish, Lord Yan."

The bewildered General Wei was pulled in front of the writing desk. Yan Xiaohan casually picked up some files for verisimilitude. Lowering his voice, he said, "Go to the Marquis of Jingning Manor for me, tell him the news from outside. Tell Fu Shen that he must be careful and make his preparations soon. No matter what happens, he has to hold steady. He must not act blindly without thinking."

This raised a flame in Wei Xuzhou's gossip-loving heart, but seeing that Yan Xiaohan's expression was solemn and he didn't seem to be joking, he quickly nodded and said, "Set your mind at ease, Your Honor, just leave it to me."

However confidently he spoke, Yan Xiaohan ultimately couldn't keep the eunuch delivering the decree waiting too long. He had to temporarily put this mess aside and hasten to Yangxin Hall.

The note-taking eunuch Tian Tong had never gotten along with the Feilong Guard, and the young eunuch shared in his teacher's enmity; he was unwilling to reveal anything. Only when

Yan Xiaohan entered Yangxin Hall did he find that in addition to Emperor Yuantai, the crown prince Sun Yunliang was also in the hall.

"This humble servant pays respects to His Majesty, pays respects to His Highness the crown prince."

"Arise."

Emperor Yuantai was tall, his features dignified. His face had a slightly plump, slack appearance. There were two deep folds beside his nose. His lips were slightly thin. His was a stern, domineering, fickle appearance. This emperor was worthy of being called able and efficient. He had always been of serious disposition, quite solemn, but presently he seemed to be in a good mood. There was even a smile on his face, wiping away the anger and gloom previously brought on by the case of the diplomatic mission, making him actually seem far more kindly.

It seemed that this wasn't a bad thing. Yan Xiaohan felt slightly relieved, thinking to himself that he really was in a fright after the tricks and tactics coming one after another in recent days; he was a little jumpy.

The crown prince wore a long face and stood by unmoved. Yan Xiaohan could feel his gaze on him. It wasn't malicious but contained a fine, needle-like probing.

"The crown prince may return to the Eastern Palace." Emperor Yuantai wished to speak to Yan Xiaohan alone. He considered, then for once gave the crown prince a word of encouragement. "In today's matter, you have done well."

Receiving this praise, the crown prince had already attained his primary goal for the day. He had no further hesitation about giving up his position. He averted his gaze from Yan Xiaohan, even smiled at him. He bowed and withdrew.

That smile seemed to contain indescribable mockery and pity. Yan Xiaohan suddenly had an ominous premonition.

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1. Longyang - A colloquial term for male homosexuality.

CHAPTER SIX

WHILE LORD YAN, DOOMED TO WORRY AND HARD WORK, WAS suffering his fill of torment at the palace, the same Marquis of Jingning that he was concerned about was surrounded by chaos.

Fu Shen's traveling party had only settled down a few days ago. His full-blood little sister, Princess Qi Fu Ling, had sent a servant to pay her respects and deliver some items, as well as to convey that she would be coming in person to visit him another day. Fu Shen truly had no strength to deal with her and scrupled on account of the Marquis Manor not actually being the home of her parents. Worried that Prince Qi would be touchy, he refused on the spot: "No need for that, just tell her to look after herself."

The person who had come from the Prince Qi Manor was a servant who had come with Fu Ling from the Duke of Ying Manor when she was married. He knew their uncompromising eldest young master's temperament very well. He didn't dare to say half a word in protest, only went back to convey his response directly to Fu Ling.

When the response was delivered, Prince Qi Sun Yunduan happened to be present as well. Hearing this, he couldn't resist shaking his head. "While Marquis Fu means well, he is being somewhat unreasonable."

Since learning that Fu Shen had been injured, Fu Ling had been so worried that she hadn't slept for many nights, and she had furtively cried in private several times. Now, hearing that familiar insensitive diction, for some reason, she actually inexplicably calmed down. She clenched her teeth and held back her tears, saying, "What an embarrassment in front of Your Highness. My older brother is stubborn as a mule. He has always been like this."

Sun Yunduan and the princess had been married since they were teenagers. They were on excellent terms. He couldn't resist cracking a joke. "Now you dare to criticize him behind his back?"

Fu Ling blushed. "Your Highness is making fun of me again. Da-ge is cold on the outside but warm on the inside. He just never has any mercy when he speaks. I don't know what kind of sister-in-law would suit him in the future."

Prince Qi remembered the rumors his subordinates had reported and deliberately changed the subject. "Who can predict how a marriage will work out? Marquis Fu has just returned to the capital. The Marquis Manor must be extremely busy from top to bottom. It would be unsuitable for you to go now." He took Fu Ling's hand and shook it gently. "Wait another couple of days until he's settled in, then go pay him a visit, how about that?"

Fu Ling's eyes lit up. "Your Highness will permit me to leave the manor?"

Prince Qi turned his head and kissed her cheek. With a quiet laugh, he said, "He's your big brother, not an outsider. There's no harm in it. Only you must promise me to look after your health, in your condition. You must not be rash…"

A faint flush instantly came over Fu Ling's face, making her countenance look even more brilliant, so bright and beautiful she shone. She snuggled into Prince Qi's arms and quietly said, "I understand."

The weather was gloomy today, the wind colder than before; it seemed as if it was about to rain. Fu Shen feared this type of weather most. His old wounds ached incessantly, vexing him. He was about to call someone to push him to the study so he could find some leisure reading to distract himself with when a servant came to report that Princess Qi had come in person to pay a visit. Her carriage was already at the gate.

Fu Shen's head instantly began to hurt. "That nuisance… Help me up. Uncle Fu, tell Xiao Xun and the bodyguards to keep away, and keep the people in the rear courtyard under control so there isn't a clash. Ask the Princess to come into the main hall, get two boys to wait on her. I'll go over as soon as I've changed."

In the main hall, Fu Ling was in no mood to examine this unfamiliar domicile. She was so nervous she kept wringing her handkerchief. Shortly, the rumble of a wooden wheelchair rolling over the ground came from further in. As if she had been scalded, she forgot herself and leapt out of her chair. She turned her head just in time to meet the eyes of Fu Shen, sitting in the wheelchair.

Fu Shen had perhaps not readied himself, either. He was visibly startled.

Fu Ling stared at him blankly, as if she had suddenly forgotten how to speak. The older brother in her memories, who could hold up heaven and earth and conquer all obstacles, seemed to have been broken, huddled pathetically in a crude bamboo wheelchair, his features unusually sharp due to excessive emaciation. But the corners of his eyes curved gently as he gave her a somewhat unpracticed smile.

Fu Ling couldn't hold back anymore. Agitated, she threw herself toward him, gave a wail, and burst into tears.

The old maid who had accompanied her was nearly scared out of her mind. Fu Shen was pushed back by the force, but, utterly steady, he pulled her into his arms. "Oh my goodness, go easy… Little lady, do you think you're still seven years old?"

Her taut heartstrings at last gave out altogether. Princess Qi forgot decorum and restraint, clutched his sleeve tightly, and sobbed so hard she could hardly speak. Babbling, she could only keep repeating, "I only have one big brother…"

Fu Shen's breath caught.

The knot of ice at the bottom of his heart was melted by her scalding tears, turning into a pool of warm water. Over the years, the two of them had been separated, one far away at the northern frontier, the other living in the depths of the prince's manor. Even the memory of their last meeting was vague. But the affection between blood relatives had never faded. He gently patted Fu Ling's back, the awkwardness of caution in his movements, and quietly comforted her. "Don't cry, don't cry. It's all right, gege is here, don't be sad."

Supposing General Fu really was a star of command come to earth, then Princess Qi must have been a god of rain reincarnated. The Marquis of Jingning Manor was nearly swept away by tears. Fu Shen managed with difficulty to console his little sister. Physically and emotionally exhausted, he pressed on his temples and said helplessly, "I told you not to come. You didn't listen and just had to come here to cry. Aren't you worried it'll injure your health? After your visit, we won't have to water the manor's garden for three years."

Fu Ling was using hot water to clean her face and fix her makeup. Hearing this, she snorted a laugh and grumbled, "You think I wanted this? Making me sit at home fretting is what would injure my health."

Fu Shen choked on these words and resentfully lowered his hands.

When Fu Ling was cleaned up, she sat back down next to Fu Shen and looked at his legs, which had a thin blanket lying over them. A worried look appeared on her face involuntarily. "Da-ge, the wounds to your legs… Can they really not be healed? There are so many famous physicians in the capital, why don't I ask His Highness to help…"

"His Majesty has already sent a doctor to diagnose and treat me," Fu Shen said concisely.

Fu Ling immediately held her tongue, despair flashing over her face. Shortly, she forced out a happy look once more. As if in self-consolation, she said, "It's all right, even if they can't be healed… it doesn't matter, as long as you're alive. Stay in the capital, don't go anywhere, all right?"

Her ardent gaze was like a knife, stabbing straight at the bottom of Fu Shen's heart.

He didn't want to lie to Fu Ling, but he also couldn't bear to make her sad, so all he could do was give a vague "Mhm."

Fu Ling finally let herself be coaxed into happiness, a trace of a genuine smile appearing. She chatted at length with him for a while, then suddenly remembered something and asked, "Oh, right, has our family sent anyone to come see you since you've been back?"

Had she not mentioned it, Fu Shen wouldn't even have remembered that family, so he gave a grim laugh in place of an answer.

Fu Ling said helplessly, "I used to think that even if she didn't like us, she was after all the family matriarch, at any rate she would have to make nice on the surface. I didn't think she would take cutting ties to this extreme."

"Since when do we have any 'ties' with her? They were all severed in one clean cut when I moved out, and there's no need for you to accept a compromise just because she's your elder," Fu Shen said carelessly. "All she cares about now is Fu Ya. Just you wait, see when that darling son of hers will lay her a golden egg."

This time, not just Fu Ling, but even the servant who had come from the Duke of Ying Manor laughed.

"We were having a nice chat, why mention something so annoying?" Fu Shen wasn't in the mood to get tied up with domestic trivialities. “What about you? How are you getting along in the prince’s manor?”

“Everything is going well, and His Highness is very good to me.” Fu Ling turned slightly. Like a little girl, she took his sleeve and shook it. Quietly, she said, “Actually, I was hoping you could come back to the capital this year.”

“What’s the matter?” Fu Shen was instantly on the alert. “What’s happened? Has the family been bullying you again?”

It wasn’t his fault that he was oversensitive and let his thoughts go astray. All the big brothers in the world were more or less like this. Their concern was often embodied in being ready to back a person against their bullies.

“It’s good news.” A slight flush appeared on Fu Ling’s face. “Da-ge, you’re going to be an uncle!”

“Oh.” Fu Shen had only understood the first sentence. His expression normal, he nodded. After a few breaths, he suddenly realized what the second sentence meant and was so startled he nearly stood up from his wheelchair on the spot. He raised his voice abruptly. “What did you say?!”

Fu Ling put a hand over her still flat lower abdomen and, all smiles, said, “It’s been over three months.”

“H-how…” The Marquis of Jingning had for once lost his composure. “How old are you? Wait, when did this happen?”

Fu Ling watched his discomfiture with a smile. Fu Shen smacked himself on the forehead and finally realized that his question had been nonsensical. He laughed in spite of himself. “That’s really… good. Wonderful.”

In fact, Fu Shen didn’t amount to an up-to-standard older brother. Their mother had died young, their stepmother was not affectionate, and he had naturally gone out onto the battlefield early, finding it hard even to come home every year, never mind looking after his little sister. The two of them were only linked by ties of blood. Until right now, he had even thought that he had nothing worth saying to his sister.

And Fu Ling was outwardly soft but inwardly firm. Even under Madam Qin's hand, she had smoothly matured into a fine young lady. The only time she had made a request of Fu Shen, it was because the crown prince had sent word that he intended to take her for his first wife, and she didn't want to marry him.

Only then had Fu Shen had an abrupt sense of being an older brother. He had wiped away Fu Ling's tears and told her, "If you don't like him, then don't marry him. Don't be scared, I'll take care of everything for you."

It was an older brother's mentality doing the mischief. When he looked at Fu Ling, he always thought she was still a dainty, weepy little girl, never willing to say anything straight out, always insisting on tugging at an adult's sleeve first.

He hadn't thought that in the blink of an eye, she would be married and a wife, and in another blink of an eye, about to be a mother.

When he heard that she was pregnant, after his excitement had passed, Fu Shen didn't dare to keep her at his manor for long. This person who didn't believe in gods or ghosts had unexpectedly turned superstitious. He was afraid that he and the manor full of soldiers who had come fresh from the battlefield had too much vitality, which would be bad for the child.

He simply chased Fu Ling out. Only when she had reached the gate and been helped into the carriage by her maid did Fu Shen say earnestly through the window, "Take good care of yourself. I'm staying in the capital for now. I'm not going anywhere. You get through your pregnancy without worrying. Don't put yourself to any trouble."

Fu Ling was about to cry again. Holding back sobs, she said, "Just look at what my gege says… Who would dare to put me to any trouble?"

"Right," Fu Shen agreed warmly. "Gege will take care of everything for you. Go on."

The Marquis Manor's front gate shut once more. Uncle Fu returned inside, pushing Fu Shen. Midway there, Fu Shen suddenly said, "Remember to go to the storehouse and collect some nourishing medicinal ingredients, take some bolts of silk and furs of various colors, and send them to Prince Qi Manor another day."

Uncle Fu said, "Is this a gift for the young lady? Should I add something for His Highness? Not counting today, Prince Qi Manor has sent quite a lot of gifts lately."

Fu Shen nodded. "I remember there's a Gold Star Dragon Tail She inkstone in the study. Go get that later, and think of a few other things to add."

At the last moment, he hit upon the notion of going to the study, but the study had long been sealed off and disused. The old servant was worried there would be an accumulation of dust inside and ordered it swept before daring to let Fu Shen enter.

He hadn't thought that trouble would come of this sweeping.

While Fu Shen was looking for the inkstone, he discovered an unfamiliar long wooden box on the desk. This didn't belong to him, but someone had displayed it on the table, front and center, as if deliberately putting it there for him to see.

The wooden box was very light. There was a noise when he shook it, as if it contained a thin stick. Fu Shen was very wary. He turned it over and over, inspecting it several times. When he determined that there was no booby trap, he at last carefully lifted the lid.

His hand suddenly went rigid in midair. His eyes froze altogether.

A damaged black crossbow bolt lay quietly in the box, its shaft nearly snapped in two, its tip twisted, as if it had struck something hard.

This thing was familiar enough to strike fear into the heart. No one in the world could have a deeper impression of it than Fu Shen.

On the ninth day of the ninth month, in Tongzhou's Qingsha Gap, in an instant of life and death peril as the stones fell, this was the cold bolt that had come from behind and brushed past him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

AS IF HE HAD BEEN SLAPPED IN THE FACE, FU SHEN'S EARS RANG. His heart beat wildly. This arrow seemed to take him back into those nightmarish memories, the boulder falling from overheard. His crippled legs seemed to regain sensation, sending up the pain of breaking bone strong enough to knock a person unconscious.

He bent over sharply, his back arching. This was an automatic gesture of self-protection. Bean-sized beads of sweat dripped from his temples, trickling down his gaunt cheeks to his neck. Under the pale skin, the veins protruded, as if a ferocious beast about to break through were buried there.

There was a cracking sound. The hard wooden box hadn't withstood his strength. It had split apart from being squeezed. Splinters of broken wood stuck out, firmly pricking Fu Shen's palms.

But this fine, sharp pain was like an acupuncture needle, instantly going through brain and bone, fixing his wavering soul in place. The heavy morass was punctured by daylight; the earth-shaking nightmare quickly dispersed.

Fu Shen, cold sweat streaming from him, raised his head. He hadn't cried, but there was actually redness in his eyes. They were bloodshot. His thick black eyelashes hung low, like feathers, revealing a seemingly bloodstained grim gaze like that of a trapped beast.

His gaze smoothly moved to the wooden box on the table. He suddenly found that a trace of a white edge showed in the crack—it turned out that there was also a note caught between the inner and outer layers of the box.

About an hour later, Xiao Xun, standing watch outside the door, heard Fu Shen call for someone from inside. He opened the door and came, then frowned. He had a feeling that in addition to the smell of burning charcoal in the room, there was also a faint scent of blood.

"Lord Marquis."

Fu Shen sat at the desk, his expression calm and undisturbed, perhaps a little colder than usual. He was toying with a long wooden box. Fresh blood had dyed his palms red. Even the box was dotted with bloodstains. But it was as if he couldn't feel pain. His bearing as usual, he said, "Who has gone into the study within the last three days? Get them all over here."

Xiao Xun was startled by his blood-covered hands and wanted him to dress the wounds first, but Fu Shen didn't so much as look up. Xiao Xun didn't dare to disobey him. He quickly bent his head and agreed. As he was about to exit, Fu Shen suddenly called him back. "Wait."

"Yes, sir?" Xiao Xun said.

He was briefly silent, then said, "Bring the bodyguards, too."

Following the misadventure at Qingsha Gap, the first thing Fu Shen had done after waking up was to send people to find the crossbow bolt that had nailed itself in the stone. It was only to be expected that they would return with nothing. He had thought that that bolt had been buried under the rolling stones, not expecting that someone had gotten there ahead of him to remove this crucial piece of evidence.

But who was capable of this? Capable of moving faster than his people, capable of delivering the evidence right under his nose, and capable of finding the truth so swiftly?

—And what was the intent behind exposing that truth?

Not long after, servants of all heights and mixed ages had filed in to stand in front of him, heads bent and shoulders contracted, with terrified looks in their eyes, each and every one wishing to sink into the earth. Outside the room, meanwhile, stood a group of ferocious Beiyan Cavalry, who from their expressions seemed ready to raise their swords and come in to cut people down.

Fu Shen's voice was slightly hoarse. It had a peculiar sense of exhaustion to it. He casually tossed the box onto the big red sandalwood desk. Getting straight to the point, he asked, "This box—who saw it? When did it appear in the library? Who put it here?"

According to chronological order, the first people to enter the study came forward to identify themselves; all of them shook their heads and said they didn't know, until he came to the servants who had swept the study in the morning and had a vague impression of it. They said that when they had come in, they had seen a box right there on the desk. They had thought it was an old possession of Fu Shen's and hadn't dared to move it thoughtlessly.

Everyone's eyes fell on the young page who had come into the study to bring a vase the day before.

This was a child of thirteen or fourteen, wearing a drab short robe and pants. His parents had passed away long ago, and he worked in the Marquis Manor along with his grandfather. He normally hid in the rear kitchen, not coming out. He had never seen such a spectacle. When Fu Shen's gaze swept over him like frost, he panicked at once. He fell to his knees. Crying, he kowtowed while calling out "Spare me, master."

Fu Shen rubbed the center of his forehead. The crying was giving him a headache. He coldly said, "Shut up."

His voice was very soft, but perhaps because he was accustomed to giving orders, every word was very heavy, as if each one could smash a hole in the ground when it fell. The child instantly fell silent, only trembling more fiercely. Fu Shen asked, “Were you the one who brought in this box?”

“N-n-no, it wasn’t…”

“Then who was it?”

“Th-this one doesn’t know…”

Fu Shen said darkly, “I don’t have the patience to watch you sit there and shake. The sooner you make a clean breast of it, the sooner it’ll be over. I’ll give you another chance. Think before you speak.”

The young page bit his lower lip, his hands constantly wringing the hem of his shirt. At last, he couldn’t hold out under Fu Shen’s might. He quietly told the truth, “This one r-really isn’t sure, it might be Wang… Wang Gou’er…”

Fu Shen was perplexed. “Who is Wang Gou’er?”

“He-he’s the younger son of the Wang family from the east city’s Poplar Canal, he often comes with his father to deliver food to the Marquis Manor… Last night Grandpa Fu told me to bring a vase to the study, and Wang Gou’er said he wanted to come see, too, see what an important person’s study looked like, and I thought, the Marquis isn’t going to go in anyway, so… so I took him inside…”

“Xiao Xun,” Fu Shen said.

“Understood,” Xiao Xun said.

An outsider had trespassed in the Marquis Manor’s study. While there was nothing important in the study, it was still an enormous slip-up for the bodyguards. Xiao Xun immediately took two bodyguards to investigate this “Wang Gou’er.” Fu Shen slowly scanned the ring of servants standing beneath him and all of a sudden gave an extremely soft cold laugh.

“It would seem I have truly been careless in recent years. I thought that this ‘backyard’ was better than nothing, with no value that would draw fire. But it turns out that while I can take precautions night and day, thieves inside the house are hard to guard against, and there are more holes than in a sieve. Today’s matter can serve as a lesson to all of you, and to me. Uncle Fu—"

The old servant tottered forward. "Please instruct me, Lord Marquis."

"I'm giving you three days to disband all the servants in the manor, send them back to wherever they came from to find their own way. From this day forth, the Marquis Manor will be managed by the Beiyan Army. No interlopers are to be permitted here. That's all, go ahead."

From below came the sounds of a crowd of people kneeling; cries for mercy fell incessantly on the ear. "Lord Marquis! Please be benevolent, Lord Marquis… Leave us a means of making a living!"

"Don't make me repeat myself," Fu Shen said impatiently. "Xiao-Ding, go supervise."

A bodyguard fell out of rank in response, picked the old servant up by the back of his collar, and carried him out. With matters being conclusively settled, the rest of the servants, like quails strung together on a rope, followed after with their shoulders hunched, leaving the study in succession.

Fu Shen had dealt swiftly and resolutely with a pile of trivialities, but the gloom blocking his chest hadn't eased at all. He was mentally and physically exhausted, so annoyed that he would have loved to close his eyes and simply go belly up. Before this thought could take concrete shape, urgent knocking suddenly came from outside. "Lord Marquis, there's an imperial guard boss outside who said someone gave him a message to pass on to you."

Fu Shen was currently enmeshed in the unease brought on by the wooden box. He was unusually sensitive to the words "imperial guard." He immediately said, "Show him in."

Wei Xuzhou was greeted with looks the whole way. Each of the bodyguards in the manor was a soldier fresh from the battlefield; their gazes were almost more than this easy-living imperial guard general could bear. By the time he saw Fu Shen sitting in his wheelchair, General Wei practically felt affection for him. He quickly stepped forward to salute him. "I am Wei Xuzhou, commander of the Left Shenshu Corps. My respects to the Lord Marquis."

Right now, Fu Shen suspected everyone he saw, but the North Yamen Imperial Guard was under Yan Xiaohan's command and couldn't raise too much suspicion in him. Strange to say, while Fu Shen and Yan Xiaohan's codes of conduct were poles apart, there was a rather profound openness between them. He had a delicate faith in this thug who was notorious among the court, so he seemed much milder facing Wei Xuzhou. "No need for such courtesy. Please sit, General Wei. Pour some tea."

Wei Xuzhou didn't dare to be too friendly with him lest observers be suspicious and jealous, so he got straight to the point. "There is no need for the Lord Marquis to go to the trouble of entertaining me, I'll leave when I've said what I have to say. Our Lord Imperial Investigator was just summoned to an interview by His Majesty. Before leaving, he instructed me to pass on this message to the Lord Marquis: lately, a rumor has secretly been passing through all the noble households in the capital, saying that you, er… have the Longyang proclivity. You must be prudent about this matter. What the Lord Imperial Investigator means is that the Lord Marquis must be especially careful and deal with this as soon as possible."

This news was no less than a bolt out of the blue. Fu Shen was thunderstruck, the blow so heavy that he went numb from the top of his skull to his heels. "What did you say?"

Wei Xuzhou said, "His Honor also said, no matter what happens, he asks the Lord Marquis to exercise patience for the time being and on no account act rashly."

Fu Shen's expression abruptly changed. "What does that mean?"

Wei Xuzhou understood nothing. He looked innocently back at him.

There were too many things, one after another, each one solid as a rock, choking him so that he could hardly catch his breath. Countless thoughts and suspicions grew rapidly, like bewildering obsessions, instantly overtaking his whole mind—

No matter what happened, he couldn't act rashly.

The iron bolt in the box, the note between the box's layers, the "Wang Gou'er" who had snuck into the study… Did Yan Xiaohan mean one of these things, or were there more plots he had yet to discover, hidden in the dark?

Was this oracular knowledge, or was it premeditation?

"Lord Marquis! Lord Marquis!"

As his mind was wandering, the old servant burst panting into the study, breaking off Fu Shen's frenzied thoughts, which were on the point of driving him out of his mind. He pulled his feet free of these deep-rooted preoccupations, abruptly realized with a start that he had let himself get caught running up against an insoluble problem; he had gone too far.

"What is it?"

Uncle Fu excitedly said, "An imperial decree, we've received an imperial decree! A eunuch has come to invite you to go receive an imperial edict!"

Wei Xuzhou was extremely tactful. Hearing this, he immediately stood. "Since you are busy, Lord Marquis, I will take my leave now."

Fu Shen met his gaze and nodded understandingly. "Uncle Fu, please take this gentleman out by a side gate. When I have changed into court dress, I will go see the imperial envoy."

⁂

Inside Yangxin Palace.

"Menggui."

After the crown prince left, Emperor Yuantai suddenly changed his form of address. Yan Xiaohan froze momentarily, then respectfully answered, "Your Majesty."

"Lately We have many a time woken suddenly in the middle of the night," Emperor Yuantai said. "At times We are clearly alone in Our sleeping quarters, yet there always seems to be someone fast asleep on the other side of the bed. What do you think this means?"

Though Yan Xiaohan was a military official, at any rate he had read some books. When he heard this, he was immediately bathed in cold sweat.

His thoughts moved lightning fast. His reactions were exceptionally quick. Without further ado, he immediately knelt with a thud to beg forgiveness. "Responding to Your Majesty, Your Majesty is the true Son of Heaven, protected by the Purple Star, impervious to evil forces. It must be that scoundrels and villains are feigning a haunting in the shadows, hatching some plot. Guarding the imperial quarters at night is this subject's responsibility. I have been ineffective, resulting in a disturbance in the palace chambers and causing discomfort to Your Majesty. This crime cannot be atoned for!"

His admission of error was very skillful. This had not been Emperor Yuantai's intention at all. He couldn't tell whether Yan Xiaohan was really dumb or only playing dumb, so he simply raised the subject more obviously. "It is not a supernatural matter, it is Our mind that is uneasy. In the capital, there are the North and South Imperial Guards, the troops of the imperial city, the five great capital barracks—nearly three hundred thousand soldiers. Yet We often look around and feel surrounded by tigers and wolves.

"Sometimes We even wonder whether the empire of Great Zhou, the empire of the Sun family, is truly in Our hands, or whether outsiders are permitted to control it."

With this mentioned, the sword had been drawn and the arrow bent; his intent had been made plain. Yan Xiaohan truly couldn't keep playing dumb. All he could do was bow and say, "Please speak openly, Your Majesty."

Emperor Yuantai asked, "Menggui, do you still remember, when I made an exception to promote you to the position of

Imperial Investigator of the Feilong Guard, what I said at the time?"

In its previous form, the Feilong Guard had been the Imperial Feilong Stables, the place where the palace had reared horses, overseen by a eunuch. During the reign of Emperor Chunhua, the third emperor of Great Zhou, the previous court's officials had grown in power and gained control of the imperial guard for a time. The emperor had been like a puppet, his throne in imminent danger. In order to make a breakthrough, Emperor Chunhua had changed the Imperial Feilong Stables into the Feilong Guard, going through a eunuch to regain control over the North Yamen Imperial Guard. The Feilong Guard had in a single leap become trusted subordinates of the emperor, with enormous power. They would not involve themselves without the personal word of the emperor. After this, the North Yamen Imperial Guard had been controlled by eunuchs, until the twentieth year of Yuantai, when the previous Imperial Investigator of the Feilong Guard, Duan Linglong, passed away, and Emperor Yuantai unexpectedly made an exception, breaking with tradition to promote the then-general of the Left Shenwu Guard Yan Xiaohan to be the new Imperial Investigator.

It remained a mystery to this day what Yan Xiaohan had relied on to reach this position, but it couldn't be denied that Emperor Yuantai did in fact depend very heavily on him. And Yan Xiaohan had in fact done well as an independent official, turning the Feilong Guard into the sharpest knife in the emperor's hand.

He remembered to this day what the last words of that imperial edict had been.

"You are thus commanded to undertake the post of Imperial Investigator of the Feilong Guard, represent Us in patrolling all points and supervising the officials. All your eyes see, all your ears hear, wherever you go, wherever your sword points, it will all be as though We are there in person."

Yan Xiaohan said, “Your Majesty’s earnest expectations are carved on my heart. I would not dare to forget them until I die.”

“It is not in vain that We have set store by you all these years.” Emperor Yuantai straightened up and gravely said, “We wish you to perform a certain assignment. This assignment may take two or three years, or perhaps it may take longer. But if you are able to succeed, We will thenceforth be able to sleep easy.

“We are going to confer a marriage between you and Fu Shen.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

YAN XIAOHAN'S HEART ABRUPTLY MISSED A BEAT. NOT EVEN caring that he was being rude, he stared at Emperor Yuantai in astonishment. "Your Majesty?"

What the hell! This was absolutely preposterous!

He and Fu Shen had been trading insults in court only three months ago. The whole capital knew that the two of them couldn't stand each other. Why did the emperor suddenly want to make them a couple?

"The Fu family is deep-rooted in the northern frontier. They pose a serious threat from within."

This statement was just like a pail of cold water to the face, instantly soaking him to the skin. Without anything further needing to be said, the cause and effect behind arranging this marriage laid itself out in its entirety in Yan Xiaohan's mind: no wonder those rumors had suddenly appeared in the capital, no wonder the crown prince had just looked at him with that expression… They had planned all of this. Emperor Yuantai's fears concerning the Fu family were by no means a recent development, so could the events of Fu Shen being attacked and injured, then returning to the capital, have been another part of this plan?

No, that was wrong. The primary goal of the assassination attempt had been for Fu Shen to die. That he had been injured but not died was a mishap. There were too many variables in an arranged marriage, and the control it could exert over Fu Shen was next to nothing. This was obviously an impromptu decision, not something planned from the start; it seemed more like it was taking advantage of the rumors.

But the possibility that this was a new plan conceived after the previous plan had failed still couldn't be excluded. Most crucially, where had the rumor that "Fu Shen is a cut-sleeve" actually come from?

"We will be honest with you. The crown prince suggested this to Us earlier. Apparently the rumors in the streets say that Fu Shen has unusual interests. We can use this arranged marriage as an opportunity to remove him from the position of Beiyan Commander and bring in a new commander."

The crown prince Sun Yunliang—what grudge did he have against Fu Shen?

Half a beat late, Yan Xiaohan recalled that it seemed that the crown prince had once wished to make Fu Shen's younger sister his first wife, and because Fu Shen had persisted in not yielding, the crown prince had been politely turned down by the Fu family.

He had reported this to Emperor Yuantai. Emperor Yuantai also ought to understand how much selfish desire was involved in this stratagem of the crown prince's. But compared to controlling Fu Shen, this bit of selfishness perhaps wasn't worth mentioning in his view.

Emperor Yuantai changed the subject. "This plan is feasible enough. But once Fu Shen is gone, who is qualified to take the position of Beiyan Commander in his place?

"The crown prince recommended Yang Sijing." He shook his head and seemed to find this funny and a little exasperating. He brushed it away with a light statement: "He's still young, after all, and his thoughts are shallow."

This father and son duo were about to make Yan Xiaohan lose his temper. Yang Sijing was the son of Empress Yang's older brother, the crown prince's cousin, who had been made General of the Right Jiumen Guard through the empress's favor. However down at heel Fu Shen might be, he was still the Duke of Ying's eldest son by his first wife, a first rank official of the court, the Marquis of Jingning who had fought his way off the battlefield. What the hell was Yang Sijing? A rich kid who had been promoted through favor. Yet they dared to dream of putting him in Fu Shen's place. Did they really think the Beiyan Army's two hundred thousand cavalrymen were all dead?

The mighty heir apparent to the throne could actually come up with such a contemptible means of injuring an estimable subject. When one thought that this person would become emperor in the future, how could one avoid feeling cold at heart?

Seeing that he didn't speak, Emperor Yuantai continued, "We are unwilling to permit the Fu family to gain power unchecked, but We also do not wish to destroy our own defenses. The Beiyan Cavalry is Great Zhou's line of defense at the northern border. The danger from the Tartars and the Zhe has yet to fade. Rashly changing commanders might shake military morale; this requires slow action. We have thought long and hard. You have resided in the capital for a long time. You ought to move on."

Lord Yan, who had just inwardly thought mockingly *What the hell is Yang Sijing?*, instantly found himself falling into the same situation—there was nothing for it. Before the youngest general of Great Zhou, all his lower-ranked peers were nothing.

He lowered himself once more and kowtowed to beg forgiveness. "This subject is talentless and unworthy. I dare not accept Your Majesty's kindness. Please reconsider, Your Majesty."

"You are unwilling?" said Emperor Yuantai.

Clenching his teeth, Yan Xiaohan said, "Pardon my offense, Your Majesty."

"Menggui." Emperor Yuantai's tone suddenly turned cold.

"We recall that you once told Us yourself that you are not interested in women, and We promised to find you a marriage that would be to your wishes. As Fu Shen walks the same path as you, and is exceptional in terms of family background, talent, and appearance, why are you still unwilling?"

Cold sweat appeared on Yan Xiaohan's back. He was just about to close his eyes and make up a lie to the effect of "my heart lies elsewhere" to fob off His Majesty, but Emperor Yuantai raised a hand and tossed a bright yellow imperial edict in front of him.

The jade scroll handle clattered when it hit the gray tile. Half the carving on it broke off. Tiny fragments of jade splashed on Yan Xiaohan's sleeve.

"Take a look," said Emperor Yuantai.

Yan Xiaohan slowly unrolled the imperial edict.

"By virtue of the Mandate of Heaven, the emperor decrees: the Marquis of Jingning Fu Shen, General, Defender of the Nation, descendant of the Duke of Ying Fu Jian, who as an official for six years has performed many meritorious services, afflicted foreign enemies with dread, and faithfully protected the nation, is looked upon by Us as an aid, with profound favor. Commander of the Left Shenwu Guard and Imperial Investigator of the Feilong Guard Yan Xiaohan, descendant of a noble family of the capital, loyal and upright guardian of the imperial chambers, with evident virtue and benevolence, of heroic bearing and handsome appearance, proficient in literary and military arts alike, is commended highly by Us. These two individuals are a perfect match made by heaven. Today We decree that a marriage between them will be arranged and direct the officials to select an auspicious date to hold the wedding. It is hoped that the two of you will be of one heart and one mind, do greatest honor to this nation, and not disappoint Our intentions. The emperor has spoken.

"We have already sent someone to the Marquis of Jingning Manor to proclaim this edict." He watched Yan Xiaohan fixedly with a cold gaze. "If you have made up your mind, you may pick up the imperial edict and rise to take your leave."

The underlying meaning was that if he hadn't made up his mind, he could kneel here until he died.

Of Yan Xiaohan and Fu Shen, one was rich in military achievements, praised by all as a faithful official and able general, and the other was an eager fortune-hunter, spurned by the world as a lackey and a thug; no one would have thought they belonged on the same path. But right now, the emperor's weighty words were written on this bright yellow imperial edict; henceforth, these two people who followed different roads would have to walk toward the same destination.

Even more absurd than this imperial edict arranging their marriage was that Yan Xiaohan's first reaction upon seeing it hadn't been anger, but a cold satisfaction.

Not without malice, he thought, *What will Fu Shen's reaction be when he receives the imperial edict arranging this marriage?*

This pillar of the court, shouldering duty and righteousness, dutifully striving to his utmost, was being trampled into the mud like this by the emperor he was devoted to heart and soul. Could he still continue to "hold the nation in his heart" wholly ungrudgingly? Would he swallow the insult and accept the imperial decree, or would he put on his armor and leave the capital raising the banner of the Beiyan Army, simply revolt?

Emperor Yuantai was waiting for his answer, but Lord Yan seemed to have forgotten where he was; his mind began to race in irrelevant directions. Just then, the doors of the hall suddenly opened a crack. The high eunuch, Eunuch Tian, slipped in on tiptoe, quickly came alongside the emperor, and whispered something into his ear.

Emperor Yuantai was just inwardly offended about Yan Xiaohan not knowing what was good for him. Hearing Eunuch Tian's report, his expression turned as overcast as though water were about to drip from it. Clenching his teeth, he said, "Go on, repeat what you just said to Minister Yan."

Eunuch Tian obediently came up in front of Yan Xiaohan. "The Marquis of Jingning is unwilling to accept the decree. He is currently kneeling in front of the palace gate, unwilling to rise, requesting to see His Majesty."

Emperor Yuantai facetiously asked, "Tian Tong, how is the weather outside? The Marquis of Jingning is not in good health. I hope he doesn't freeze."

Eunuch Tian understood at once. "Beg leave to inform Your Majesty, it is raining outside. At first it was only a drizzle, but now the rain has strengthened. Well... the Marquis of Jingning has already waited outside for an hour. Perhaps I should bring him an umbrella?"

The main hall was suffused with the faint earthy smell peculiar to rainy weather. The floor tiles were ice-cold, painful to kneel on. Without needing to imagine it, Yan Xiaohan knew that Fu Shen would be in a hundred, a thousand times more pain than him.

Apart from the pain, there would also be his heart's blood, colder than the autumn rain.

He had at last understood the emperor's intentions.

What Emperor Yuantai wanted him to agree to wasn't only this absurd arranged marriage, but also to taking military authority over the Beiyan Cavalry bit by bit from Fu Shen's hands. From the first, he'd had no intention of considering Yan Xiaohan's objections. His queries had been only feigned civility. In front of the emperor, Yan Xiaohan had no right to say "no."

The Imperial Investigator of the Feilong Guard was an upper third rank official, while the Commander of the Beiyan Army was an upper first rank official. If he could only rise to that position, splendor and wealth would be near at hand. Moreover, with the emperor's support behind him, kicking aside a crippled commander didn't seem to pose much difficulty. However awesome Fu Shen was, he still didn't have three heads and six arms, and furthermore, he was a "man of honor" who wouldn't betray his country even in the face of colossal insult.

No matter which angle you looked at it from, this was a worthwhile bargain.

Only Fu Shen lay in the way, casting a dark and bloody pall over his glorious future.

The passage of time suddenly became extremely slow. After an incalculable time, the pendulum of the Western striking clock in a side chamber struck several times in a row, breaking the silence that filled the hall.

Emperor Yuantai was starting to lose his patience. He was just about to give him another potent dose when the long silent Yan Xiaohan suddenly spoke. "There is one thing I do not understand. I earnestly request that Your Majesty enlighten me."

"Say it."

Yan Xiaohan said, "The Fu family has been upright and honest for generations. Fu Shen has defended the border for many years, with absolutely no disloyalty. Moreover… he is tantamount to an invalid now. To arrange a marriage at just this moment is not only likely to incur the criticism of the courtiers, but will also enhance Fu Shen's influence. This subject is stupid and does not understand why Your Majesty insists on acting thus at this time."

These words seemed to mean that he was relenting. Emperor Yuantai inwardly released a breath and involuntarily revealed something of a confiding air. "Fu Shen is indeed a loyal subject, but what he is loyal to is not Us.

"To be a military commander is to be a divine weapon in the hand of the sovereign. Fu Shen admittedly has a keen edge that is hard to resist, but if a sword has too many thoughts of its own, it does not put a person at his ease. Among subjects, there are those who are loyal to the sovereign, and those who are loyal to the nation. Fu Shen is like his uncle Fu Tingxin, a subject loyal to the nation.

"If there is a danger that a sword's point will turn to aim at its master, how can We pass him on to future generations with confidence? The Beiyan Cavalry guard the northern border, their swords pointing outward; they are a divine force, the best defense. But when their swords point inward, they will only be some thousands of li from the capital."

Yan Xiaohan once again inwardly cursed Fu Shen. In all likelihood, that fool had done some hard but thankless job and offended the emperor in the process, and his Beiyan Army was sealed up tight as a drum. If the Feilong Guard wanted to dig up information, it would simply be as hard as ascending to heaven. Had he known what had happened, prepared a countermeasure in advance, he never would have been caught unawares by the emperor and the crown prince like this!

"Menggui, you have been at Our side for a long time. You are Our most handy confidant," Emperor Yuantai said. "You are different from Fu Shen. If you only take this step, your future prospects will be boundless.

"If you persist in your refusal, We will give you another choice."

Yan Xiaohan raised his eyes, looking at the emperor high on his throne.

The weighty words were pronounced. There was grim murder staining the ice-cold phrases as they rolled one after another down the golden steps.

"Either you accept the decree and marry Fu Shen, or you kill Fu Shen for Us."

Time had passed and the world had changed. As much as Emperor Yuantai had once relied upon the Fu family, so he now feared Fu Shen; it had even reached the point that he could not feel glad if he did not get rid of him.

Yan Xiaohan picked up the imperial decree that a corner had broken off of and rolled it up. He had not ceased to kneel. Now he lowered himself deeply, prostrating himself. "This subject offers earnest thanks for Your Majesty's great favor."

Scant daylight lit the inside of the hall, shining on the plaque hanging high up that read "Justice and Benevolence."

This autumn rainstorm had broken with tempestuous force.

There was water pooled everywhere outside the palace gates. Yellowed leaves whirled and scattered. Amid the dimness that filled the eye, the rain-soaked red clothes, like a maple leaf lingering, unwilling to fall, were unusually striking to the eye.

Yan Xiaohan, his gaze fixed straight ahead, walked up in front of that perfectly upright back. From on high, he coldly said, "His Majesty won't see you. Don't waste your time. Go home."

Fu Shen didn't tilt back his head, only raised his eyelids, his gaze level with Yan Xiaohan's legs. His manner was haughtier than that of the person standing. "Did His Majesty send you here?"

"This matter has already been settled. There is no benefit in saying anything further. Don't ask."

Fu Shen composedly said, "You've agreed."

Yan Xiaohan seemed to suddenly be enraged by him. The anger that he had pent up inside the palace towered to the sky. It all came down right at him in torrents. "I did. What did you expect? Everything I have now, my power and my position, were all given to me by His Majesty. What right do I have to refuse him?!" He seized Fu Shen's collar. "You have the face to ask me? Aren't you noble and virtuous? Aren't you devoted heart and soul to the nation, your loyalty pledged to His Majesty? Thunderclaps and rain are all the blessings of the sovereign, so why have you come now to kneel before the palace gates to beg His Majesty to withdraw his decree? Shouldn't you cheerfully accept the decree and thank him for his kindness?! For whose benefit do you kneel here?"

The rain fell harder and harder. Yan Xiaohan bent down and leaned close to Fu Shen, so close that he was even pressed against his cheek, ice-cold from the rain. The man's hoarse roar was kept low in his throat, drowned amid the swelling sounds of the rain, so faint that it didn't dare to enter anyone's ear, yet Fu Shen still heard it clearly.

"You are the mighty Beiyan Commander. Why stay here and put up with this persecution? Why don't you rebel?!"

Fu Shen blinked the water droplets off his eyelashes. Suddenly, he laughed.

All his resentment and helplessness, his dejection, his fellow-feeling, his apathetic insight and bone-deep suffering, were collected in that laugh.

Yan Xiaohan gave a start. It was as if he had been scorched by that laugh. He abruptly let go.

Fu Shen briefly closed his eyes. It seemed to be some form of concealment. Soaked by the rain, his face was so white it was practically transparent. Water droplets rolled from the ends of his hair and the corners of his eyes, their tracks zigzagging. There was a terrifying fragility about his overly thin jaw and neck. "In fact, I know that His Majesty won't withdraw the order. Even kneeling here until my legs break won't do any good. I just can't let it alone... Do I owe you another favor? I'm truly sorry.

"But, Lord Yan, when a gentleman conducts himself in society, there are actions he takes and actions he must not take. The Beiyan Cavalry's illustrious name and glory after decades of defending the country—how could I let it turn to eternal infamy because of my own selfish interests?

"Perhaps I cannot be a gentleman, but I will not be a criminal."

The wind blustered and the rain poured. The dark clouds were heavy. There was darkness between heaven and earth.

"Today's disgrace will one day be repaid."

Each word was soaked in blood and carried the sandstorms of the north. Falling amid the standing water, it seemed to be wrapped in a layer of ice.

Yan Xiaohan had nothing to say, no answer to give. He had thought that he understood Fu Shen, so he had looked down upon his excessively naïve persistence. Only today did he discover that Fu Shen was far more than what he had understood, and he was entirely incapable of overlooking his unfailing perseverance.

He sighed, his fury entirely extinguished by the rain.

Yan Xiaohan reached out, planning to help him up; he couldn't stay here in the pouring rain. But before his hand had touched Fu Shen, without any warning, Fu Shen suddenly collapsed forward. Fortunately, Yan Xiaohan was quick of eye and deft of hand. He reached out and made a grab, and Fu Shen fell right into his arms.

"Fu Shen!"

CHAPTER NINE

"FU SHEN!"

An indistinct cry sounded in his ears. He was still conscious. It was only that his body had lost all sensation. The sound of the rain clung to him like his shadow. Someone bent down and lifted him in his arms. There seemed to be something familiar about the feel of those arms.

He was reminded of the warm embrace he had been pulled into when he had fallen on the ground a few days ago, and of the gentle hands that had patted his back long ago.

Who was it?

He was taken to a dry and narrow cage, forced to leave that warm chest that was neither too soft nor too hard. He hadn't yet had time to fully enjoy it. His temper immediately flared. He abruptly reached out to seize that person's collar, fiercely pulling toward himself—

Bang.

Lord Yan, who hadn't had time to straighten up, toppled into the carriage, landing on top of the Marquis of Jingning in a pose very offensive to public decency. And Fu Shen, living up to expectations, was at last knocked awake by him.

Yan Xiaohan hadn't expected this sickly ghost to be able to rise from the dead even after fainting. He was just about to get angry when he happened to meet Fu Shen's eyes.

There were still rain drops hanging from his eyelashes, on the point of falling. His gaze was unfocused. It actually looked as though he was about to cry. Though he knew very well that this was false, Lord Yan's anger was still extinguished in spite of himself. He got up and sat up straight. Quietly, he asked, "How about you come to my manor for now and let Shen Yice have a look at your wounds?"

He was a little concerned about the condition of Fu Shen's injuries. After all, he had been out in the pouring rain, kneeling on stone tiles, for over two hours. Catching a chill was nothing to play around with. Fu Shen may or may not have understood. He gave an indistinct "Mhm."

His eyes were half-closed in weariness, and he didn't even have the strength to speak. He leaned against the wooden side of the carriage as if boneless. The carriage headed toward Yan Manor. The capital's roads were level, but Fu Shen was still jolted from side to side. Yan Xiaohan observed with rapt attention for a long time, then finally extended a tentative hand toward Fu Shen. As expected, before he could get close, the person who had his eyes closed, pretending to doze, struck like lightning, precisely grabbing him by the wrist. "What?"

Yan Xiaohan said, "Does something hurt?"

Confusion flashed over Fu Shen's face. "Everything hurts. Why?"

His fingers were ice-cold. Abnormal warmth came from his palm. Yan Xiaohan sighed. He twisted his wrist and cleverly threw off his grip, then raised a hand to check the warmth of his forehead. "You're feverish."

So feverish it burned his hand.

But Fu Shen himself had no sense of it. He also reached out to feel. "But it's not hot?"

Yan Xiaohan said, "That's my hand you're feeling."

With the back of his head as a fulcrum, Fu Shen turned around to face him and carelessly said, "It's nothing… I'll just sleep it off."

He was used to toughing it out, anyway. For minor illnesses and aches, he could go to sleep and be fine when he woke up.

Unfortunately, this time the method seemed to have stopped working. On the way from the palace to Yan Manor, the imperfectly healed internal injuries and the chill he had taken from the pouring rain erupted at once in overbearing illness. Adding in his overtaxed energy and mental and physical exhaustion, Fu Shen was a little delirious from fever. When it was time to leave the carriage, he was completely unconscious and wouldn't wake no matter what. There was nothing Yan Xiaohan could do. He had to personally carry him inside.

Each and every one of the servants awaiting him outside maintained a correct attitude, not daring to breathe loudly. Yan Xiaohan was a strict master. His servants were far more efficient than the gang of weak and crippled servants at the Marquis Manor. Soon they had readied bathing tubs and hot water, laid out clothing and blankets, and came to invite the two of them to bathe.

Yan Xiaohan didn't feel comfortable delegating this task. He personally undressed Fu Shen. When his crimson official robe was removed, the soaked white inner robe stuck to him, affording a nearly complete view of the man's lean body. Unfortunately, Yan Xiaohan couldn't come up with any charming thoughts right now. All his attention was focused on Fu Shen's legs.

Layer upon layer of bandages had been soaked through by the rain. When they were removed, the purple bruises and savage scars were simply shocking. Yan Xiaohan turned his eyes away, unable to bear another look. He bent down and picked him up, bent his legs, and cautiously placed him into the wooden tub filled with hot water. He was splashed all over by the water spilling out but took no notice of his own state. "Lord Marquis… Fu Shen?"

His fingers inadvertently brushed the side of Fu Shen's neck.

All his black hair had been swept to the other side, revealing a light scar next to the artery. This location was dangerous enough to be frightening. Had it been just a sliver deeper, this person wouldn't have survived to be lying in one piece in the tub.

Yan Xiaohan was only learning today how many scars Fu Shen had, old ones and new ones, never before revealed in front of others, like a historical record, all carved behind the history of being made a Marquis while young, of high spirits and daring.

Suddenly he understood what Fu Shen had meant by being "unable to let it alone."

If he had not once trusted the emperor, had not once placed the nation in his heart, what reason would there have been for him to put on heavy armor, go time after time onto the battlefield and toward almost certain death—weren't the ancestral blessings of three dukes enough to let a wealthy and high-ranking young master live in comfort and ease?

Yan Xiaohan called a young page from outside and pointed to the Marquis of Jingning in the tub. "Keep an eye out, don't let him fall into the water."

There was a screen in the bathing room, separating two spaces. Yan Xiaohan went around to the other side, quickly rinsed himself clean and wrung his hair dry with a towel, coiled it up on top of his head with a hairpin, changed clothes, then returned to Fu Shen's side. The young page had never seen him take such care of anyone. He couldn't resist stealthily looking on, inwardly amazed.

Fu Shen's mind was in chaos from his fever. Only a portion of his consciousness was still clear. Feeling himself go all at once from ice-cold rain to warm water, he was so comfortable he was on the point of dozing off, but after a while, someone suddenly helped him up. A familiar voice said into his ear, "Come, put your arms around my neck."

The scent of agarwood slowly spread, with a trace of indefinable seduction.

As if bewitched, Fu Shen reached out his arms toward him.

That person's arms applied slight pressure, holding his shoulders. Then there was a splash, and he was lifted out of the water.

The instant his body left the warm water, cold came from all sides to envelop him. Fu Shen seemed to have been tossed back into the desolate world of piercing wind and cold rain. He moaned indistinctly and unconsciously began to struggle, attempting to protect his vital parts, curling into a ball.

Yan Xiaohan nearly fell into the water from his sudden force. Before he could get angry, he got a clear look at Fu Shen's gesture and quickly called to the young page to bring over the blanket and wrapped him up tightly. "It's all right, don't flail," he quietly soothed. "Are you still cold?"

Fu Shen muttered something. Yan Xiaohan didn't hear it clearly. He drew closer. "Hm?"

Fu Shen didn't speak again. His arms and legs slowly unfolded inside the warm blanket, but his brow was still tightly furrowed, as if he were making a supreme effort to endure. Yan Xiaohan considered his expression and tentatively said, "Does it hurt somewhere?"

Fu Shen made a vague sound. Yan Xiaohan had meant to dress him, but now he absolutely didn't dare to move thoughtlessly, afraid lest he touch some hidden wound. At just that moment, a report came from outside that Shen Yice had arrived, so Yan Xiaohan took Fu Shen, blanket and all, to the bedroom.

Shen Yice saw him come in, carrying Fu Shen, who on top of that had his hair loose and was undressed, and his eyeballs nearly popped out of their sockets from staring. "Th-th-that..."

"Stop 'that'-ing, it's the Marquis of Jingning." Yan Xiaohan put Fu Shen on the bed. "He spent two hours kneeling in the rain and passed out from fever earlier. Have a look, can you bring him back to life?"

Shen Yice thought that the frequency of the Marquis of Jingning's appearances had been rather high lately, but he didn't think too much of it. As he took Fu Shen's pulse, he said, "What happened? He can't even walk, why would he get up and go kneel in the rain out of nowhere? Your Honor, were you also out in the rain just now? Have them prepare a bowl of ginger tea."

Yan Xiaohan waved a hand irritably. He didn't want to mention that mess.

Shen Yice was very tactful. He didn't keep asking. He concentrated on taking Fu Shen's pulse from each of his hands, then lifted aside the blanket to have a look at his legs. He wrote out three prescriptions and sent someone to prepare the medicine, while he himself washed his hands with hard liquor and dressed Fu Shen's wounds anew.

"He cried out in pain before, do you think there are other injuries?" Yan Xiaohan asked, frowning.

Shen Yice suspected that the Imperial Investigator's brain had been washed away by the autumn rain. He patiently explained, "Not even knees made of iron could take kneeling on the ground for two hours, never mind that his kneecaps had already been broken, and the injuries had yet to heal entirely. Getting them wet would cause them to swell and ache. Also," he continued, pointing out the window at the gloomy weather, "soldiers like the Marquis of Jingning all have some old wounds. This kind of weather is what they fear most. To tell the truth, if the average person were in this kind of pain, he would have been rolling around on the ground by now."

At this, Yan Xiaohan sighed softly with emotion. "The average person couldn't become him."

Putting on armor and going out onto the battlefield before he was old enough for the capping ceremony, winning a wealth of military honors with his life at stake, keeping the peace at the northern frontier for years—sadly, while he had dodged countless direct spears and hidden arrows, he hadn't dodged the knife coming from behind.

To tell the truth, when Emperor Yuantai had brought up having him take over the Beiyan Cavalry, for an instant, Yan Xiaohan had indeed been excited. Though the Feilong Guard had a high position and great power, they were the target of curses from practically the whole court; and however just and noble the imperial guard may have been, in the end it was not a good place to make a brilliant career.

Among the men of the times, who hadn't thought of holding power over the Beiyan Cavalry like Fu Shen, to gallop over battlefields, to wipe up the invading enemy? Who hadn't thought "if that were me," how they would put their aspirations to good use, what kind of brilliant career they would make?

But was the position of Commander of the Beiyan Army one that could be held merely through good luck?

Yan Xiaohan knew that there was no way he could substitute for Fu Shen. There couldn't be another Fu Shen in the world. Sadly, Emperor Yuantai didn't understand that, and neither did the crown prince.

Before the ten thousand li of the Great Wall could be destroyed at the hands of external enemies, they would be torn down by their own people.

"Your Honor." While Yan Xiaohan had been lost in thought, Shen Yice had nimbly finished dressing Fu Shen's wounds. He spoke suddenly. "While you perhaps are unwilling to take trouble on this account, as a doctor, I must still say something. The Marquis of Jingning's wounds, I fear, will never heal entirely. He has run a fever twice recently, each time more dangerous than the one before. His body can no longer take any torment.

"After all, he is… a hero. If you can help, don't let him struggle on his own. At least this business today of kneeling in the rain for two hours must not happen again."

Yan Xiaohan's face showed no emotion. He only asked, "Do I recall correctly that you aren't at all acquainted with Fu Shen? I never saw you speak on behalf of a patient before."

"Just take it as me being a busybody." Shen Yice put the implements laid out on the table back into his medicine chest and closed it. "Indeed, I have no friendship with the Marquis, but sometimes I think, as long as the Marquis of Jingning is alive and well out there, the capital will be safe, and we Han people will not end up fighting to survive under the iron heel of barbarians."

Yan Xiaohan finally remembered that Shen Yice came from Xuanqing, which had suffered a massacre at the hands of the Eastern Tartars and had then been retaken by the Beiyan Cavalry. His parents, all his family, had been killed. Only he had survived by a lucky chance, because he had been the youngest and his parents had hidden him in a medicine cabinet.

He didn't continue the conversation. He rose and saw Shen Yice out. The two of them walked through the winding corridors in silence. When they came to the central hall of the main courtyard, Shen Yice stopped and saluted Yan Xiaohan in parting. "You do not need to see me out, Your Honor."

"Jizhi," Yan Xiaohan called to stop him. He hesitated a moment, then asked a question he had been hesitating over. "Fu Shen's injuries... How confident are you that you can make him stand again?"

Shen Yice laughed bitterly. "Your Honor, you have too high an opinion of me."

"Say what there is to say," Yan Xiaohan said. "There is no need to hold back. I want to hear the truth."

Shen Yice hesitated for a long moment, then, with utmost caution, said, "There is only a ten or twenty percent chance. It is easy to reconnect broken bones, but the damage to his veins, and especially his shattered kneecaps, will perhaps take three to five years of nursing. Never mind the expense and the medicines this will take, the key is that there has to be someone with him to take care of him. But even so, it will still not necessarily be successful."

But having a glimmer of hope was still better than being helpless in the face of a crisis.

Yan Xiaohan nodded and came to a decision. "That being the case, we'll do as you say. Starting tomorrow, you will treat the Marquis of Jingning's wounds. If you need to examine the wounds or apply medicine, you come to my manor."

Shen Yice was astonished. “Your Honor?”

“No need to be shocked. You’ll have to learn of it sooner or later,” Yan Xiaohan said steadily. “Just now, His Majesty issued a decree, arranging a marriage between me and the Marquis of Jingning.”

A bolt of lightning came crashing down. Doctor Shen stood stock still, dumb as a wooden chicken.

Shortly, an earth-shattering shout burst out of the main courtyard. “Has His Majesty gone mad?!”

CHAPTER TEN

SHEN YICE'S EXPECTATIONS HAD BEEN CORRECT. THIS ILLNESS bore down menacingly upon Fu Shen. The cold was only the beginning. Under its influence, Fu Shen's internal and external injuries acted up together, nearly killing him.

His fever held for two whole days and nights. He was dead to the world from illness. Yan Xiaohan used every means possible to reduce his temperature—rubbing him with hard liquor, laying cold towels on his forehead; he hardly had a chance to close his eyes. Luckily, after feeding him three bowls of medicine per day, in the end his efforts finally paid off. On the evening of the third day, the hand-scorching heat at last gradually receded. While Fu Shen had yet to wake, his condition had stabilized. Yan Xiaohan could finally manage an uninterrupted night's sleep.

And Fu Shen's energy had been completely sapped by this illness. He was unconscious for another full day. But that night, he came thoroughly awake in the middle of the night.

It was the dead of night, not a sound to be heard. The room was dim. The bed and curtains were quite different from the arrangement he was familiar with. There was only one lantern on the table, lighting a small area around it as if obscured by fine gauze. He caught the faint sound of breathing, turned his head, and found that beside the bed, a low cot was laid out. Yan Xiaohan was curled up with his back toward him, sleeping fully dressed.

The tumultuous memories from a few days earlier slowly returned to his mind, but they could no longer raise billowing waves. They had all turned into a hidden current surging below the surface, constantly sinking into the unfathomable depths.

Fu Shen's whole body hurt from lying down too long. He wanted to roll over to relax his stiff and aching back. He hadn't expected that as soon as he moved, Yan Xiaohan would wake. He rolled over, sat up, and reached out to help him up. Because he wasn't completely awake yet, when he spoke, his voice was unusually soft and low. "What is it? Do you want water, or do you want to relieve yourself?"

He was sitting sideways on the edge of the bed, one hand holding Fu Shen's arm, the other on his back, so he naturally leaned down and pressed their foreheads together, checking the temperature. "That's all right, no more fever. You've run me ragged."

Fu Shen had no memories from his illness. He'd had no idea that he had been receiving such good treatment. At the outset he almost didn't understand. When he realized something was off, he immediately leaned back to avoid him. "It's fine. What time is it? Can you… help me sit up for a while?"

The sleepiness gradually faded, and Yan Xiaohan's eyes finally became clear. He silently helped Fu Shen sit up leaning against the headboard, then took three steps back and sat back down on the low cot, putting a polite and unfamiliar distance between them.

The atmosphere was awkward.

The two of them seemed to wake simultaneously from a mental breakdown. Without prearrangement, they dispelled distractions and remembered that between them lay a preposterous arranged marriage.

No matter how powerful its political implications and regardless of whether it was an out-and-out conspiracy, however unsuitable a romantic match might be, even between two men, that did not alter its basic nature; it was still a marriage.

"It's after midnight. Today is the eleventh day of the tenth month," Yan Xiaohan said. "You've been sick for several days."

He hadn't said much, but at this slight reminder, certain blurred but tender scenes suddenly flashed through Fu Shen's mind. The Marquis of Jingning, who had just been entirely at peace, once again felt the beginnings of a headache. He had thought that he was a person very capable of bearing things, but now he only wanted to lose his memory, wanted to start over, pretend that nothing had happened.

"You've gone to a lot of trouble… Yan-xiong, go back to sleep, there's no need to mind me."

Yan Xiaohan didn't answer him. Instead, he carelessly coiled his hair, picked up an outer robe from the bedside, and tossed it to him. "The nights are cold, put this on. Are you hungry? I'll have someone bring porridge."

A man like Fu Shen, with an aristocratic background, famous since a young age, growing up amid a heap of praise and worship, after seeing too much of this, could easily become unusually obtuse toward the idea of someone being good to him. But perhaps because of the influence of that wretched arranged marriage, or because a major illness made a person's heart unusually sensitive, from this series of actions, what he first sensed was actually Yan Xiaohan's quiet thoughtfulness.

He awkwardly thought to himself, *He really does… have some wifely virtues.*

With a single thought gone astray, all the lines of thinking that followed involuntarily strayed as well.

Considering appearances alone, Fu Shen was forced to acknowledge that Yan Xiaohan was even a little more remarkable than him. He had changed out of the dark blue official robe of the Feilong Guard and was wearing a pale green wide-sleeved old robe for home wear. When he stood to brighten the oil lamp, his black hair slid down from his shoulders in front of his chest like flowing water. His eyelids were lowered wearily, as if his drowsiness had yet to fade, and his lips still turned up slightly at the corners when he wasn't smiling. In the lamplight, the lines of his face were mild and soft, letting a person temporarily forget his identity, wallowing entirely in the pale and smudged light and shadow.

Fu Shen narrowed his eyes and looked him over repeatedly from head to foot, totally unaware of how much he resembled an ill-intentioned hoodlum.

When Yan Xiaohan turned and went out, he pulled the door shut behind him, smiling as he walked down the corridor. Perhaps the fever had left Fu Shen confused. He'd been staring at him with absolutely no restraint. He probably hadn't realized how invasive his gaze was. Yan Xiaohan had even felt his clothing about to melt under his stare. At last he really couldn't take it anymore; he'd had to flee in defeat.

The servant keeping vigil saw him leave the room smiling brightly and thought that Fu Shen had breathed his last. Otherwise, how could his master be as happy as if he had gone senile?

When the warm porridge was brought, the two of them, after having been possessed, finally returned to normal. Fu Shen sat across from Yan Xiaohan holding a bowl in both hands. The heat brought a bit of color to his pale lips and cheeks and managed to straighten his spine. At last they could calmly observe the bumpy road ahead, covered with thistles and thorns, and consider where they ought to step.

Yan Xiaohan spat out the tea he was using to rinse his mouth, put his tea bowl back on the table and spoke first: "Lord Marquis."

Fu Shen was still slowly drinking his porridge. "Hm?"

Yan Xiaohan said, "I have some questions that I hope you can clear up for me."

"Listen, Lord Yan." Fu Shen put down his spoon and carelessly crooked the corners of his mouth. "We're grasshoppers tied to the same string, so you can stop 'Lord Marquis this' and 'Lord Marquis that'-ing. You're being very distant."

There was a tacit understanding implied by this mockery. Yan Xiaohan had to admit that while Fu Shen was rather stubborn in some respects, the majority of the time, he was still relatively candid and clever. Having dealings with a smart person like this, he didn't need to beat around the bush too much.

"Since you say so, then very well," Yan Xiaohan said, coming to terms. "Jingyuan, from what His Majesty said the other day, it seems that he is extremely dissatisfied with you. Did you recently go behind his back to do something that offended His Majesty?"

"Ahem, uh… don't use such an intimate address, either." Having choked himself, Fu Shen helplessly said, "Can't you just use my full name?"

Yan Xiaohan's smile was fulsome. He didn't give way at all. "We're going to be married. Take it as acclimating early."

This numbed Fu Shen so much he lost his appetite. He put the bowl of porridge aside and said, sighing, "It's a long story. Were you born when His Majesty ascended the throne?"

Yan Xiaohan raised his eyebrows. "I had just been born. Why?"

"The origin of this business predates that," Fu Shen said. "The late emperor had nine sons, and the one most favored by the late emperor back then, as well as the one with the greatest hope of inheriting the throne, was the fifth prince, His Highness Prince Ying. Prince Ying and the third prince, the present Prince Su of the First Rank, were brothers with the same mother.

"My Second Uncle used to be His Highness Prince Su's study companion. The two of them grew up together, they were as close as… brothers, so Uncle and Prince Ying were also very close. To be overly familiar, he really saw him as a little brother."

Yan Xiaohan thought there was something strange about his hesitation midway, but he didn't pursue it.

Fu Shen said, “The late emperor fell suddenly ill during a stay outside the capital. Only the eldest prince and His Majesty had accompanied him then. After the late emperor passed away, his testamentary edict was read out by the Imperial Instructor Yang Gong. Contrary to everyone’s expectations, the throne ultimately passed to His Majesty.

“When His Majesty was first enthroned, quite a few people called the authenticity of that testamentary edict into question, because Yang Gong and the present Empress are close relatives from the same clan. There were also those who contacted Prince Su and Prince Ying in private, attempting to plot an armed rebellion. His Majesty seemed to be aware of it, and therefore, the year after ascending the throne, he sent Prince Ying to a fiefdom.

“In the second year of Yuantai, the Eastern Tartars’ Alma Tribe invaded Great Zhou, and the place that bore the brunt was Prince Ying’s fiefdom of Ningzhou. The border forces were weak then, the barbarians marched straight in unchallenged. Prince Ying led his manor’s guards in resisting the Eastern Tartar cavalrymen and went missing after several days of fierce struggle. Prince Su and my Second Uncle sent searchers in multiple directions but came up with nothing. Under the circumstances, it was very unlikely that he had survived. Over time, this matter slowly faded from people’s memories. No one mentions it now.

“But they never gave up on looking for Prince Ying. After Uncle passed away, it fell to me.” Fu Shen smiled. “Who could have thought that heaven never leaves people without hope. I really did find Prince Ying’s child.”

Yan Xiaohan was astonished.

“When Prince Ying died in battle, one of his concubines was pregnant. She was captured by the Eastern Tartars. Because she was beautiful and sophisticated, they actually let her live, and later she became a favored concubine of a powerful official in the Eastern Tartar tribe. She preserved the last drop of Prince Ying’s blood. She wanted to take the child and escape back to Great Zhou, but sadly she was picked up midway by Uji herdsmen and had to hide her name and identity, pretend that she was a Han woman who had been bought, give herself to the head of the Uji Tribe, Hattu.

"More fortunately, not long after she escaped, the entire Alma Tribe was destroyed. There was no one left on earth who knew her original identity. This remarkable woman outlived the previous head of the Uji Tribe and is now among the highest nobles of the Eastern Tartars. Now that I've said this, you ought to know already who she is."

"The Eastern Tartars' previous head Hattu's and their current head Orci's… wife," Yan Xiaohan whispered. "Hash Khatun. It's really her?"

Fu Shen said, "Prince Ying's given name was 'Hun,' a kind of jade, and 'Hash' means 'jade' in the Eastern Tartar language."

Yan Xiaohan said, "So where is Prince Ying's child?"

Fu Shen said, "It was the Battle of the Xiqiu Pass. I hadn't wanted to interfere, but Hash Khatun sent a trusted aid to Beiyan to see me, asked me to take Prince Ying's child back to Great Zhou. So I passed on a message to Prince Su. During the fifth month, he personally came to Beiyan to see the envoy. He determined that Hash Khatun had indeed come from Prince Ying's household."

Yan Xiaohan said, "So you agreed?"

As if he had closed the most crucial link, cause and effect automatically laid itself out in an instant. All the things that had happened in the past suddenly had a clear sequence.

"You agreed to what the Khatun asked, and the compensation she gave you was… the Uji Tribe begging to surrender. So they could legitimately stay in Great Zhou, she placed Prince Ying's child with the Eastern Tartar diplomatic mission accompanying the youngest prince to the capital, isn't that right?" Yan Xiaohan stared at Fu Shen's legs. "But the Eastern Tartar diplomatic mission was ambushed in the Qingsha Gap. There were no survivors…"

Fu Shen softly said, "What do you think, does His Majesty know about this?"

The Feilong Guard were the emperor's eyes and ears, the sovereign's thugs. If even Yan Xiaohan hadn't known something, how could His Majesty know it?

But if His Majesty didn't know it, why would he be so insistent on getting rid of Fu Shen?

"Perhaps His Majesty has great trust in you." Mockery flashed in Fu Shen's eyes. "But maybe he hasn't given you all of his trust, Lord Yan."

This was his true objective in holding out and telling this story despite his sick body.

Yan Xiaohan had meant to test Fu Shen's depths, not expecting that Fu Shen would strike back by sowing discord.

Neither of them understood the other's true thoughts. Yan Xiaohan suspected that Fu Shen had a backup plan, and Fu Shen was on guard against Yan Xiaohan taking the emperor's side. The two of them spoke candidly, but in secret it was one probing attempt after another, nonstop. Neither dared to give his entire trust, even though they were both already standing on the same damaged ship in imminent peril.

Yan Xiaohan blurted out not remotely sincere praise: "The Lord Marquis is very crafty."

"My deliberations are not as comprehensive as Lord Yan's," Fu Shen returned the compliment. He very deliberately said, "I can also tell you one more thing.

"I did not leave Yanzhou and return to the capital entirely because of the injury to my legs. It was also because my people made new arrangements for the route the diplomatic mission was to travel, arrangements that had slight discrepancies from what the Tartars knew. Among those discrepancies was the Qingsha Gap. And among the Eastern Tartar diplomatic mission, there was a twenty-two-year-old envoy with Han blood."

Yan Xiaohan said, "The Lord Marquis is suggesting that His Majesty has a spy in the Beiyan Army?"

Fu Shen said, "The Eastern Tartars didn't know that we had changed the itinerary, and the Beiyan Army, which arranged the route, didn't know that the Eastern Tartars had a different itinerary. This double-sided plan was privately settled on between Prince Su and me in the interests of security. Speaking plainly, only the two of us knew that the Eastern Tartars and the Beiyan Cavalry had two different itineraries."

At the outset, his objective in making all these arrangements had actually been to take precautions against plots by the Eastern Tartars, not expecting that in the end he would take a tumble along the route only "his people" knew about.

The bolt in the Qingsha Gap had shot through the peace that had been plastered over for many years, and it had completely penetrated the long-buried fear in Emperor Yuantai's heart.

Fu Shen smiled. "Do you know, among the Beiyan Army, what kind of people could take part in an assignment concerning Prince Ying?"

Those with long service records, with high positions, with the right to speak—individuals who had the rank of general, at the very least.

"In arranging this marriage for me, His Majesty was purely concerned about Beiyan's military authority, so he went looking among the dwarfs for a general and picked you, right?" Fu Shen said unblushingly. "Lord Yan, while I've had enough of occupying this lousy position, on account of your kind intentions in sheltering me, I still have to give you a word of advice: don't be fooled by the fact that His Majesty trusts you now. Once you've taken this position, that will no longer be a certainty.

"A majority of the Beiyan Army is made up of my trusted subordinates, and a minority is made up of His Majesty's one spy. That spy isn't on your team. If all my trusted subordinates go to seek refuge with you, then you'll be the next Fu Shen. If my trusted subordinates are unwilling to rely on you, then you'll be nothing but a figurehead. And His Majesty can never permit you and that spy to team up.

"He isn't only taking precautions against me. He's taking precautions against everyone."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE ROOM SANK INTO SILENCE. THE ATMOSPHERE GRADUALLY turned cold. Yan Xiaohan had his eyes lowered, deep in thought. From his peripheral vision, he glimpsed Fu Shen turn his head away and give a tiny yawn. He seemed to be sleepy.

Only then did he remember that Fu Shen was still sick. If they spent half the night scheming against each other, when Shen Yice found out tomorrow, he would be certain to nag again.

"Forget it, go to sleep. If there's anything we need to talk about, we'll talk tomorrow." Yan Xiaohan went over and helped him lie down and lower the curtains. Fu Shen gave an "Mhm" heavily laden with sleepiness and softly said, "You've gone to a lot of trouble. Thank you."

Yan Xiaohan sat back down on the low cot beside the bed, but all his sleepiness was gone. Fu Shen's words turned over and over in his mind. No wonder Emperor Yuantai wanted to beat Fu Shen down so urgently. Having private contact with the Khatun of a foreign nation, bringing Prince Ying's child back to the Central Plains—each of these seemed like an omen of rebellion. And the past struggle over succession was even more of a sore spot in Emperor Yuantai's heart. Anyone who touched it died.

Fu Shen had simply been gambling with his life. Broken legs and an arranged marriage counted as a lucky break.

For the sake of the unfulfilled wish of a predecessor, doing a job you would lose your head over… Fu Shen had to have known what would happen to him once this was exposed.

But he seemed always to be doing difficult and thankless tasks like this.

Why?

"There are some things in this world that have to be done by someone," Fu Shen said.

Yan Xiaohan roused from his musings with a start. "Why are you awake?"

"Lord Yan," Fu Shen said derisively, "if you'd kept staring at me like that, it would have been enough to bring a dead man back to life."

Yan Xiaohan had only been focused on his wandering thoughts. He hadn't noticed that his gaze had been resting the whole time on Fu Shen. Fu Shen had taken one look at his regretful expression and known what he was thinking. He couldn't resist feeling a softness at heart, and he had wanted to tease him.

"Finding Prince Ying's child was the wish of my Second Uncle and His Highness Prince Su, so I would have done it no matter what the price to be paid. There's nothing to regret."

Yan Xiaohan asked, "And your grave injuries and wasted efforts, aren't those worth regretting?"

Fu Shen's soft laugh sounded in the night.

Yan Xiaohan startled, then suddenly saw the light.

"The two routes were the first smokescreen, the Han envoy with the Eastern Tartar diplomatic mission was the second smokescreen… Actually, you and Prince Su had already sent Prince Ying's child away, right?"

"Yes." Fu Shen nodded with a show of earnestness. "If all our efforts had truly gone to waste as you said, I figure I would have drowned myself in a river by now—I truly wouldn't have had the face to go on living."

Holding back a smile, he raised his eyes to look at Yan Xiaohan. "Stop pulling a long face, Lord Yan. I had no idea you felt such tenderness toward me. Truly, I'm ashamed."

Yan Xiaohan didn't know which eye Fu Shen had used to see "tenderness" written on his face, but he knew he was being flirted with, so he said rather coolly, "No need for politeness, you're quite welcome. After all, we're going to be family soon."

Fu Shen was pointedly silent.

"You really can't leave well enough alone." He simply didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "You'll use any self-injuring tactic to take down an enemy. Are you that willing to be family with me, huh?!"

"Lord Marquis, you have to think it through," Yan Xiaohan said patiently. "You are of upper first rank, and I am of upper third rank. If we truly become family, I actually won't be losing out. In fact, I'll be profiting."

Fu Shen choked on his words and was rendered speechless.

Seeing that he was taking a breath in preparation for flaring up at him, Yan Xiaohan decided he had done enough and made a timely concession. In reconciliation, he said, "All right, it'll be light soon, and you've just gotten better. Don't wear yourself out, go to sleep."

Fu Shen's bristling fur instantly smoothed. He knew very well that Yan Xiaohan was mollifying him, but he couldn't resist feeling a bit of drowsiness on hearing his gentle words.

The two of them chattered on and off, whispering for half the night, only briefly lying down to rest at the fourth watch of the night. At dawn, the water clock outside counted off the watches. Yan Xiaohan cocked his ear to listen carefully and rose quietly from the low cot, not expecting that as soon as he stirred, Fu Shen would immediately wake as well. But he wasn't fully awake yet. He blearily asked, "Are you going?"

"Yes." Yan Xiaohan went to the bedside. First he felt his forehead and determined that he didn't have a fever, then attentively smoothed out a turned-up corner of the quilt. When he bent over, his loose hair slid down to the pillow and gently brushed the side of Fu Shen's face. "I have to go to the palace to stand my shift today. Go back to sleep."

Eyes closed, Fu Shen made a vague, nasal sound.

That lock of hair softly stroked his cheek. A small breeze fluttered the gauze curtain at the head of the bed. He heard the sound of footsteps growing distant, the screen in front of the bed being turned, the rustling sounds coming from outside.

For a person with acute senses, even through several doors, these fragmentary sounds were still very bothersome. In spite of himself, Fu Shen pricked up his ears to hear the quiet sounds of water, footsteps, voices, objects being picked up and put down. There was also Yan Xiaohan deliberately lowering his voice and instructing, "Don't bother him, Shen Yice will come in the afternoon… Give him meals and medicine according to schedule…"

Perhaps because there was someone worrying about him, or maybe because of the cheerfulness that came of the comparison that "My colleagues all have to go to court but I can stay home and sleep in," the temporary noisiness didn't spoil his good mood. As Fu Shen waited for Yan Xiaohan to leave, he kept his eyes closed, fermenting drowsiness. Out of some association, or perhaps because he had sensed something in his daze, a familiar line of poetry suddenly emerged in his mind—

Spring nights in the capital when winter cold has gone bring dread.

Though General Fu was a young aristocrat, his erudition was truly limited. Everything he had studied had long since been returned to his teacher. He actually couldn't remember the first line of this couplet!

He vaguely recalled that this poem was about not wanting to get out of bed, and this verse just happened to contain the characters of Yan Xiaohan's name. So he whispered it over and over several times, until the noises outside quieted and he once again sank into sleep, where he seemed still unable to let it go.

When he had slept until late in the morning, washed, dressed, and eaten attended by a Yan Manor maid, then clenched his teeth and forced himself to gulp down a big bowl of bitter medicinal soup, Fu Shen still hadn't remembered the full name of that poem. He was the kind of person who would get stuck when there was anything he didn't understand and have to get to the bottom of it. Fu Shen sat by the window, pondering at length, then at last simply said to the maid, "Go to your master's study and bring some poetry anthologies, ones with heptasyllabic quatrains."

The maid had received Yan Xiaohan's instructions in the morning and didn't dare to slight Fu Shen. She quickly picked up her skirt and went to find the books. Yan Xiaohan wasn't a man of culture, either. There wasn't much poetry in his study. The maid brought Fu Shen a small stack of books and respectfully said, "Lord Marquis, these are all the poetry anthologies in the study."

Fu Shen picked one up and flipped through it. While he flipped, he actually said disdainfully, "Uncultured."

The maid had her head lowered. Her shoulders shook suspiciously a couple times.

After flipping through the stack of poetry anthologies for nearly two hours, Fu Shen finally found the origin of the verse that had perplexed him for so long in a dusty and yellowed selection of Tang Dynasty poems. The title of this poem was "In View," and the full poem read:

In view of the exquisite beauty behind the carven screen,
spring nights in the capital when winter cold has gone bring dread.
Senselessly she married an official of the golden tortoise,
who must attend morning court and abandon her sweet bed.

Fu Shen's face turned green. He nearly got a stitch in his side. He tossed the book aside furiously.

When Yan Xiaohan left court and came home in the evening, Fu Shen was at the window staring blankly at the writing utensils on the desk when he entered. He had a mind to lighten his footsteps. When Fu Shen looked up and saw him, that frightening line of "who must attend morning court and abandon her sweet bed" immediately began to echo endlessly in his mind. His expression changed several times. He breathed in wrong and instantly burst into earth-shaking coughs.

Yan Xiaohan was startled. He quickly went over to pat him on the back. "What's wrong? Did I scare you?"

Spoken aloud, this question was absurd. Fu Shen waved a hand, clutching Yan Xiaohan's forearm and coughing incessantly. Yan Xiaohan observed him briefly. When he saw that there didn't seem to be anything wrong with him and he had only accidentally choked, his suspended heart finally fell back down into his stomach. He couldn't resist saying ironically, "Lord Marquis, you truly are steady."

Fu Shen tossed his arm aside.

One sitting and one standing, their two tall and slender shadows were cast on the ornately latticed window, like two figures of jade. Fu Shen's coughing finally stilled. Yan Xiaohan casually asked, "Are you comfortable staying here? If there's anything you need, just tell the servants, don't restrain yourself. I heard you threw a book today. What happened? Can you tell me about it?"

Fu Shen's expression didn't waver. "My hand slipped."

Yan Xiaohan was doubtful. "Really? If the servants have offended you, you don't need to hold back on my account..."

Fu Shen looked at him askance. "How much esteem do you think I have for you that it would be worth my while to swallow insult?"

So Yan Xiaohan didn't pursue it further. Inwardly he laughed, thinking that perhaps he had thought Fu Shen too frail. A person who lived amid piercing wind and biting frost, who could still say "there are actions he takes and actions he must not take," must have greater endurance than people like him, who went with the tide.

In this world, hot blood would cool, lofty ideals would be lost, heroes and cowards would at last both be interred in the earth. Praise and scorn would all turn to nothingness. There was no sense in demanding things of others, so he had never cared about other people. But now, Yan Xiaohan was finding that he could not act contrary to common practice. He hoped that this person's utter sincerity and unbending backbone would be slow to wear away.

"Did anything happen at the palace today?" Fu Shen casually gathered the brushes and papers scattered on the desk.

Yan Xiaohan replied, "The news has already spread, though at present everyone is watching and waiting. I hear that the imperial censorate is planning to submit a memorial to the throne on your account. After all, you knelt in front of the palace gates for a long time that day. It reflected on His Majesty. How do your leg injuries feel, do they still hurt now? Did you run a fever today?"

"There's nothing much the matter. Mr. Shen came in the afternoon," Fu Shen said. "An arranged marriage is a private affair, after all. If you and I say nothing, no one else is in a position to speak. Don't you think so?"

Yan Xiaohan said, "I already agreed to His Majesty's face. I can't go back on my word."

Fu Shen muttered to himself briefly. He didn't speak openly, only said, "Fine, I understand."

Yan Xiaohan glanced out of his peripheral vision at the messy scrap paper on the desk. It was covered in incomprehensible scribbles that Fu Shen had put down. He curiously picked up a sheet and asked Fu Shen, "Can I look at this?"

Fu Shen thought nothing of it. "As you like."

Only by looking closely at the scribbles on the paper could they be discerned to be altered characters, something like a signature. Fu Shen saw him looking earnestly at them and casually asked, "Do you recognize them?"

Yan Xiaohan pointed at one of them. "This 'military' character is the signature of the Military Arms Office. All the weapons made by the Military Arms Office have this imprint. There's a pair of small hooks on this stroke you've drawn, which resemble an arrow. You can see at a glance that this comes from the Military Arms Office's crossbow workshop."

At the outset, Fu Shen had been absent-minded. When he heard the words Military Arms Office, his pupils contracted sharply. Forcing himself to hold back, he said, "But the arrows used by the Beiyan Army have always been unmarked. I've never seen a signature like this."

Yan Xiaohan patiently explained to him, "Ordinarily, arrows used by the military are numerous and coarse. They are often manufactured by local crafting offices of the Ministry of Works. They're irregular. Some are signed, and some are unsigned. But the Military Arms Office is different. They are primarily responsible for trying out new weapons, as well as manufacturing all kinds of weapons for use by the capital forces. So only bows and arrows used by the capital's troops will have the mark of the Military Arms Office's crossbow workshop."

Fu Shen pulled out another sheet of paper and drew a symbol like a running wild beast. "What about this one? Do you recognize it?"

Yan Xiaohan smiled. He bent down and picked up a brush, indicating for Fu Shen to hold the paper steady for him. He wrote a smoother symbol that was a better representation.

"This is a 'leopard' character drawn in a single stroke.

"During the previous dynasty, before the imperial guard split up, the imperial city's forces consisted of only ten guard squadrons, those being the Left and Right Jinwu, Baotao, Luanyi, Yingyang, and Yulin. For the sake of convenience, each branch of the imperial guard at the time was represented by an animal. Slightly altering the form of the first character of their names, they became special symbols." As he explained, he wrote and drew on the paper. "For example, the Jinwu had the character 'gold' as a three-legged crow, the Baotao's was written like this, the Luanyi had the character for the luan bird in the shape of a phoenix, the Yingyang had an 'eagle' character, and the Yulin had a 'feather' character in the shape of a crane.

"But later, as the imperial guard split up and expanded into the Ten South Yamen Guards and the Six North Yamen Corps, this set of symbols fell out of use. What makes you suddenly ask about this?"

CHAPTER TWELVE

"BAOTAO..." FU SHEN MUTTERED.

"What's wrong?" said Yan Xiaohan.

"It's nothing," Fu Shen said. "Yan-xiong, I..."

Before he could finish, a servant's report suddenly came from outside the door. "Master, Beiyan's General Xiao Xun has come to visit. He is waiting at the gate."

"Come to see you." Yan Xiaohan pulled the brush out of Fu Shen's hand. When he had spoken, he turned his head and instructed the person outside, "Ask him to come in. The Lord Marquis will go over."

Fu Shen turned his wheelchair, intending to go out. Yan Xiaohan blocked him. "Wait, what's the rush?"

He went into an inner room, got a cloak, and wrapped Fu Shen up tightly. Only then did he head out, pushing the wheelchair from behind. Without dwelling on how proper and meticulous he was, when they came to the threshold on the way out, he could even pick up Fu Shen, wheelchair and all, and carry him over, saving a considerable amount of trouble.

Fu Shen's feelings at being looked after by him were complicated. He felt a little embarrassed, but also a little gratified.

His and Yan Xiaohan's relationship was very delicate.

Though they had started arguing as soon as they met before, in private they had still just about managed to be friends. But now that they had been shoved into the most intimate of relationships, each of them had his own reservations; sometimes they were more alienated than before.

But no matter what, on the surface, at least, they had to get along. On the subject of worldly wisdom, Fu Shen was ashamed of his own inferiority. Had their two positions been reversed, he had reached the conclusion that he couldn't have been as conscientious as Yan Xiaohan.

Going deeper, he had never imagined receiving treatment like this after being injured, with someone sitting vigil beside him half the night, remembering to get a cloak for him before going outdoors. Like a poor child who had suddenly been given a big ingot of silver and had never seen so much money in his life, he had been taken unawares and was entirely at a loss.

After just a few days, he could hardly recognize the expression "false display of affection" anymore.

In the main hall, Xiao Xun saw Fu Shen, sitting in a wheelchair, pushed inside by Yan Xiaohan; his expression curdled at once.

That day, he had taken people straight to the east city's Poplar Canal to search for "Wang Gou'er," but he had found only a dilapidated two-room thatched cottage, abandoned. This had just happened to coincide with the heavy rain pouring from the sky. They had been trapped in the village. The big dog kept behind the Wang house had barked incessantly. Xiao Xun had thought something was wrong, so he had let the dog hold their clothes in its mouth and lead them to Shanhua Mountain behind the village. Three of them had hunted around for half the night and had at last found the corpses of Wang Gou'er's whole family in the depths of the mountain.

When they had carried the corpses back to the village and notified the local authorities, temporarily settling things there, Xiao Xun had immediately galloped back to the city to report to

Fu Shen. Before he had even gone through the Marquis Manor's main gate, he had been knocked silly by news of His Majesty arranging the marriage, of Fu Shen kneeling in front of the palace gates at length, and of Yan Xiaohan taking him back to his manor.

For some days after, Yan Xiaohan had been busy looking after Fu Shen and had had no attention to spare. He had specifically instructed that he would receive no guests. Xiao Xun had been refused at Yan Manor's door many times. His experiences had been varied and fraught. When at last he saw their Lord Marquis in person, he was simply physically and emotionally exhausted. He would have loved to fall down in front of Fu Shen and cry.

Xiao Xun jumped out of his chair. "General!"

Fu Shen nodded slightly toward him. His manner was steady. He seemed entirely unruffled, as though having a marriage arranged for him, being locked up by his sworn enemy in his house, had had no impact on him. He even seemed to be... enjoying himself a little?

Xiao Xun stood there and watched as Yan Xiaohan pushed the wheelchair in front of him and leaned down to whisper something into Fu Shen's ear. His attitude was intimate, speaking of a rather close relationship.

"The main hall is large, burning coal doesn't get it as warm as the inner rooms... Keep it on, don't be rowdy..."

General Xiao, who had experienced hundreds of battles, closed his eyes and firmly pinched himself on the thigh.

Damn it, that hurt.

"You two chat, I'll have them prepare the medicine." Yan Xiaohan voluntarily found an excuse to leave, leaving this space to the two of them. Before he left, he poured Fu Shen a cup of tea to warm his hands with and took the opportunity to glance at the ashen-faced General Xiao with a not-quite-smile.

The stars were resplendent, the night sky clear as if it had been rinsed. Yan Xiaohan stood under an osmanthus tree in the courtyard, pinching some fragments of wilted blossoms between his fingertips, thinking with his eyes half-closed.

Emperor Yuantai wanted to use him to transfer Beiyan's military authority from Fu Shen's hands. This transfer wouldn't be as simple as getting rid of Fu Shen. The Beiyan Cavalry passing through generations of the Fu family had become an unspoken rule. If Fu Shen were to unfortunately pass away, the authority would fall back to the Duke of Ying Manor. The current Duke of Ying Fu Tingyi was unskilled in military affairs, and his future heir Fu Ya was a useless rich kid. Whichever of them took the position, it would be a good thing for Emperor Yuantai.

Thinking about it like this, the timing of the Qingsha Gap assassination attempt was truly too convenient.

But Fu Shen was extremely hardy. Emperor Yuantai had had to settle for second best. The Marquis of Jingning could on no account have issue. Who knew whether a son of his would be as accomplished as his father in the future? The only opportunity to strike was afforded by Fu Shen's future marriage. If Yan Xiaohan married Fu Shen, he would count as halfway to a member of the Fu family.

This amounted to a smooth transitional measure. The only difference lay in whether Yan Xiaohan could make Fu Shen bring him within the circle of "his people."

Watching Fu Shen's manner these last few days, he could sense that Fu Shen intended to dissolve the alliance between Yan Xiaohan and Emperor Yuantai, but he hadn't displayed the intent to take the next step and draw him over to his own side. Fu Shen appeared to have other plans, but right now, he had absolutely no ability to act; it didn't seem like he could stir up events, turn the world on its head.

Moreover, his arms and legs were bound by shackles called "morality and justice."

Today the Ministry of Rites had already set about calculating the date of the wedding. The next step was to send someone to verify their horoscopes, complete the six etiquettes. Perhaps the mutual probing ought to end. He needed to speak openly with Fu Shen.

In the contest between Emperor Yuantai and the commander of the Beiyan Corps, he couldn't only be a game piece to be pushed this way and that.

A game piece had dignity, too.

Wrapped in chill, he stood in the night with osmanthus flowers slowly drifting over his head, as if separated from the world by a screen; there seemed to be an indescribable loneliness about his silhouette.

A long time after, the main hall's door was opened from inside. Xiao Xun visibly startled when he saw him standing in the courtyard. Suspicion immediately appeared on his face. Fu Shen was plainly even further away, but the distance was no match for his eyesight; he saw Yan Xiaohan at a glance. Their gazes met gently in midair, then slid apart like two swimming fish.

Yan Xiaohan patted nonexistent dust off his sleeve and languidly walked around Xiao Xun into the room. In a natural manner, he asked, "Finished with your talk? Should we see off the guest?"

As he walked, cold air came right at Fu Shen. He felt a little unhappy. "How long were you standing outside?"

Yan Xiaohan obviously misunderstood him. He laughed softly. "With two skilled soldiers of the Beiyan Army here, how could I dare to run a risk?"

"I see you've been frozen witless," Fu Shen mocked, pushing the hot tea on the table toward him.

But Yan Xiaohan snatched the cup from in front of Fu Shen and said deliberately, smiling, "Thank you for your consideration, Lord Marquis."

"That's my cup," said Fu Shen.

"I'm just warming my hands, I wasn't about to drink it." There was sincere innocence all over Yan Xiaohan's face. "What were you thinking, Lord Marquis?"

Fu Shen didn't respond.

Xiao Xun, his emotions complicated, watched the two of them banter flirtatiously—no, give measure for measure as though no one were around; if not for the fact that he had many years of understanding Fu Shen to go off and knew that he didn't have those kinds of interests, he practically would have thought that their ruse had turned into reality.

"General," he said to Fu Shen, stepping forward and suppressing his feeling of strangeness, "since this matter has been taken care of for the time being, why not return to the manor to rest? The carriage is waiting outside the gate."

"No."

Two gazes turned in unison toward the speaker. Fu Shen even raised his eyebrows.

Yan Xiaohan said seriously, "The Lord Marquis has caught a cold, and the injuries to his legs have yet to heal fully. The Marquis Manor is short on medicines, which is likely to slow his recovery. It would be better for the Lord Marquis to quietly remain here, and then, when he has recuperated, make further plans."

"What plans?" Fu Shen asked, smiling, though there wasn't a trace of a smile in his eyes. "Plans to marry you?"

"What else?" Yan Xiaohan said. "Do you think you have another choice, Lord Marquis?"

The smile on Fu Shen's face vanished altogether. "Are you planning to keep me under house arrest?"

Yan Xiaohan shook his head and said, "A word in private?" He took Fu Shen aside, leaned down, and whispered something into his ear.

After hearing him out, Fu Shen didn't speak for a long time, staring at him fixedly. After the silence, he suddenly turned his head to say to Xiao Xun, "Did you see all that?"

Xiao Xun, looking perplexed, nodded.

"Then that's how it is," said Fu Shen.

"W-what?" Xiao Xun was bewildered. "General..."

Fu Shen rather impatiently said, “You saw it as well as I did. His Honor the Imperial Investigator, coveting my beauty, has abducted me by force and is keeping me locked up in his manor, not permitting me to leave. So for now if anyone else wants to see me, say that I’m staying at Yan Manor to convalesce.”

Xiao Xun said nothing.

He looked at Yan Xiaohan apprehensively.

Lord Yan had been struck so hard by the unjust accusation falling out of the sky that he was seeing stars. He could hardly keep his footing. All the same, he still forced out a smile with gritted teeth and said, “Let’s do as the Lord Marquis says.”

Xiao Xun suddenly gained some insight into why Yan Xiaohan’s reputation in court was so bad—it was said that every time he argued with Fu Shen, whether he won or lost, the word in the capital the next day would always be “The court’s dog has been abusing a loyal and upright man again.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

AFTER SEEING OFF XIAO XUN, THE TWO OF THEM RETURNED TO the bedroom, and Fu Shen at last said, "What did you actually mean by that? Explain yourself."

"You didn't understand me but still dared to make Xiao Xun leave." Yan Xiaohan's eyes curved. "Aren't you scared I really will keep you under house arrest?"

Fu Shen really wanted to kick him. "Don't talk nonsense."

Yan Xiaohan said, "If you stay with me for now, I'll help you fight for a chance to return to Yanzhou. I was very clear."

"That's not what I was asking about, Yan Xiaohan," Fu Shen said distinctly. "I'm asking you, whose side are you actually on?"

You are His Majesty's most interested official, the most favored confidant of the emperor, only a step away from ascending to heaven. Why would you help a person naturally hostile to you?

Yan Xiaohan's eyes were still curved, but the gentle mockery that had just been in them had vanished. He seemed to have instantly put on a suit of impervious armor. He carelessly said, "Since there are subjects with undivided loyalty in this world, of course there are also those with divided loyalties."

Fu Shen said, "There's no need to humble yourself unduly…"

"My Lord Marquis, don't be naïve," Yan Xiaohan said, smiling. "You've known all along what kind of person I was, why waste your efforts trying to exculpate me? Though we both belong to the court, you have your own lofty aims, while I am merely making a living as an official. Not for repute, not for power, not for the people, only for myself.

"The pursuit of benefit, picking a tree on which to perch—that is what the path of an official ought to be.

"Therefore," he said, "I'm not on your side, I'm only on the side most advantageous to me, nothing more than that."

He was a piece in this game, and he was also the third player.

He could be used by one side, charge the enemy lines, and he could also flip over the whole game board at a single disagreement.

Since Emperor Yuantai didn't like the weapons in his hands to have too many thoughts, then let him be left high and dry, unarmed and defenseless.

Because the game piece was unhappy.

"Fine, I see how it's 'nothing more than that.' What an imposition on you to openly acknowledge your own worthlessness. Then what were you doing bringing me back here? Why didn't you just let me die in the rain at the palace gates?"

Yan Xiaohan was impervious, standing his ground. "Naturally it was because I coveted your beauty, Lord Marquis."

Fu Shen was silent.

A quick-to-strike regional military commander like him, what he hated most was the rambling and serpentine bureaucratic style of the capital. Yan Xiaohan knew his temper. He laughed lightly and, before Fu Shen could explode, placated, "Fu Shen, stop trying to cover up for me."

When he stopped calling him "Lord Marquis" and switched to using his name, the layer of armor over his whole body seemed to fall, revealing a distant yet familiar silhouette. That was the Yan Xiaohan Fu Shen had first met.

"Choosing a side between you and His Majesty is one thing, and casually helping you out is another thing. You and I have known each other for many years. I couldn't just stand there and watch you fall."

Just as he himself had said, benefit came before everything. The steelyard in Yan Xiaohan's heart weighed the "morality" between friends and the "morality" of the court in a way that was too clear-cut.

At last, Fu Shen was also rendered speechless for once. He had never liked verbal sparring, and he especially disliked flapping his lips to convince other people to approve of his ideas. Today's repeated interrogations were already unusual. His patience had run out, and he was even more displeased with Yan Xiaohan's "putting himself down as a hopeless case." Grim-faced, he said, "Are you done?"

Hearing this, Yan Xiaohan knew at once he was about to flare up. Fu Shen had first been a young master and later had become a general. He was used to having the final word. Sometimes when he had a fit of temper, he really was... very unreasonable.

All the same, Yan Xiaohan held up under the dark clouds over his head and insisted on saying, "I'll send someone to bring your medicine in a while. You've just gotten better, don't overtax yourself..."

Fu Shen coldly said, "Get out."

Not for nothing was Lord Yan a prodigy among talents. He swiftly shut his mouth obediently and accordingly got out.

Fu Shen was so angry at him that he couldn't sleep that night. His leg injuries ached faintly. He tossed and turned on the bed, Yan Xiaohan's words echoing repeatedly in his mind.

Actually, he wanted to ask, *If it were someone else, out of morality between friends, apart from helping him out, would you also have taken him home and cared for him meticulously, kept vigil through the night fully clothed, exhorted him to take his medicine with utmost patience?*

Would you also have been offended on his behalf, grit your teeth and whispered "Why don't you rebel?" into his ear?

After an unknown length of time, the sound of the wind gradually rose outside the window. The rain beat against the lattice, the plashing urging on the deep-rooted ache and negligible drowsiness. Fu Shen had his eyes closed, resting, when the tips of his ears suddenly moved acutely as he heard footsteps outside, kept very quiet.

It was Yan Xiaohan.

He evened out and lengthened his breaths, perfectly feigning sleep. He shut his eyes fully, relying only on hearing to distinguish the other's movements. At the same time, many thoughts passed through his mind, but all of them only skimmed the surface; he couldn't catch a single one.

Fu Shen didn't want to acknowledge that he was actually nervous.

Yan Xiaohan quietly approached the bed. Fu Shen felt a heaviness on his legs, followed by a corner of the quilt being raised and something warm landing in the bedding. After doing all of this, Yan Xiaohan didn't stay long. He only left as silently as he had come.

When the door closed noiselessly, Fu Shen opened his eyes. By the faint light shining in through the window, he saw that another quilt had been added over his legs. His calves touched a solid heat source. He stuck a hand into the quilt and felt around; it was a hot water bottle made of silver.

Outside the window, the rain pattered.

His injured legs had poor circulation. Even covered by a quilt, they wouldn't warm up. He hadn't cared much about the pain before, but once he felt the warmth of the little hot water bottle, the cold from before suddenly became unbearable.

Would you also go so far for another person?

Fu Shen lay back face up on the bed and stared blankly at the bed's canopy. He thought that perhaps he really was unsuited to court. The Beiyan Commander could wield his sword and wipe out enemy invaders, but his mind could effortlessly be tied up by a quilt and a hot water bottle. If he couldn't fight free of the lap of luxury, how would he face the bloodless soft knives in the future?

What a fucking mess, he thought.

Perhaps because he had thought so much before going to sleep, now of Yan Xiaohan and now of Emperor Yuantai, Fu Shen, who rarely dreamed, actually dreamed of when he had been a teenager.

When he was sixteen, he had met Yan Xiaohan for the first time.

On the Cold Food Festival in the eighteenth year of Yuantai, the setting sun was grand and glorious in the imperial city.

Flowers flew everywhere in the springtime city, the palace garden willows put out for the occasion rustled in the east wind.

That day, Emperor Yuantai had gone out to offer sacrifices at his ancestral tombs, and the imperial guard had come along. By coincidence, Fu Shen and a group of young lordlings of his acquaintance had been out for a spring outing. At dusk, they were just returning to the city.

It was early spring, and the city was filled with young men and women. A group of handsome and elegant young masters riding into the city attracted countless gazes. There were also bold women who tossed toward the crowd their silk handkerchiefs or the various flowers they had been using to play the Fight of a Hundred Plants, their impetus not to be outdone by the old women tossing fruit at Pang An's carriage. It was an event of unprecedented magnificence. The people stopped in their tracks. There was an unusual bustle outside the city gates.

Just then, the clopping of horses' hooves suddenly came from behind. Fully armed and armored imperial guards rushed into the city. The crowd made way automatically. The lead rider called loudly, "The emperor's carriage passes, idlers keep back!"

The crowd converged in front of Fu Shen, the ones at the front retreating again and again, and those at the back for some reason got caught in a traffic jam. Seeing the imperial guards about to charge up in front of them, Fu Shen hastily turned his horse's head to make way. But when he turned, he just happened to dodge a flower that had been thrown at the back of his head.

That flower seemed to have grown eyes. It avoided Fu Shen and flew straight toward the lead imperial guard. The person who had thrown the flower must have used great strength. Fu Shen even thought he heard the sound of it whistling as it flew.

It's all over, he thought hopelessly.

Throwing flowers at a young master was called being romantic, but throwing flowers at an imperial guard was called an elderly person celebrating a birthday by hanging themselves—thinking they had lived long enough. It was a stupidly suicidal act.

The imperial guard raised a hand to stop the flower flying toward him and looked Fu Shen's way in astonishment. Fu Shen reacted extremely fast. He immediately pulled up his sleeve to cover his face.

The imperial guard was speechless.

Before there was time to say anything, the emperor's carriage had already entered the city gates, with the imperial guards leading the way and the people worshipfully kneeling. Fu Shen and his party were the children of nobles, and two among them had been granted hereditary military posts. By coincidence, they were kneeling at the very front.

Emperor Yuantai also noticed these young lordlings who were like cranes amid a flock of chickens, and he deliberately stopped to question them. Among military officials, the Duke of Ying Manor had the healthiest reputation, so Fu Shen was unavoidably singled out to receive some words of encouragement from the emperor. When his legs were hurting from kneeling on the stone tile, His Majesty finally had pity and set out back to the palace.

The emperor's carriage continued forward. Following this, the imperial guards filed past. Fu Shen was kneeling properly, waiting for His Majesty to get further away, when a horse's hooves suddenly halted in front of him for an instant.

He raised his head in bewilderment and met a pair of deep, smiling eyes.

The setting sun was golden, the dusk and clouds harmoniously combined, the man before him in the depths of the spring breeze.

Fu Shen's gaze slid from his eyes to his hands holding the reins and noticed that he held a white flower in his palm.

This was the imperial guard from before.

There was no time to pull up his sleeve now even if he had wanted to. All he could do was kneel there, watching the man turn up the corners of his light-colored lips, wave a hand to toss the flower back to him, then urge his horse on and swagger off.

And he had tossed it just right. The flower drifting down caught perfectly on Fu Shen's collar. It was simply as if… he had deliberately put it there for him.

The still immature Fu Shen was like a scholar whose soul had been captured by a tempting fox spirit. His head full of paste, he stood up, his eyes vacant, his mind not his own. That smile seemed to have melted into the evening glow; it was still reflected in his eyes.

"Hey, Fu-xiong, what are you looking at? Are we going?"

By odd coincidence, he didn't throw that flower away. Instead, he held it in his hand, got onto his horse, and, with a pretense of carelessness, asked the person next to him, "That imperial guard just now… Do you know him, Yi-xiong?"

Riding abreast of him was Yi Siming, the heir of the Duke of Chen, who had already been awarded the upper fourth rank post of Captain in the Jinwu Guard. Hearing this question, he pursed his lips, contempt appearing in his eyes. "You mean the one who just passed by spurring his horse? Worthy little brother, don't say gege didn't warn you, that brat is no good. He isn't worth the likes of us going to the trouble of making friends."

Fu Shen said, "What do you mean?"

Yi Siming said, "That man is a Captain in the Left Longwu Corps, Yan Xiaohan."

As soon as he heard this, Fu Shen understood. The Jinwu Guard was the head of the South Yamen Imperial Guard, while the Longwu Guard belonged to the North Yamen. The two had never gotten along. No wonder Yi Siming had nothing good to say about him.

Yi Siming continued, "You might not know, he's the adopted son of Duan Linglong. Don't pay attention to his good looks, what use are they? Who knows how he climbed up to his position…?"

In Great Zhou, the nobles looked down on scholars, the scholars looked down on ordinary civil officials, the civil officials looked down on military officials, and what all of them looked down on were palace eunuchs.

Duan Linglong was foremost among the palace eunuchs at the time.

One could well imagine how Yan Xiaohan, who acknowledged a court eunuch as his adopted father, would be even lower than a court eunuch in their eyes.

Somehow, when Fu Shen heard Yi Siming's words, he didn't feel disgusted; rather, he felt some inexplicable regret, just as if he had seen a flower growing beside a mire, which had snapped at the stalk as soon as it reached its full bloom.

Right, the flower.

He brought the flower in his hand up in front of his eyes to scrutinize it. But as soon as he glanced at it, his expression instantly froze on his face.

For fuck's sake, this was a twin lotus[1]!

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[1] Two lotus flowers growing on one stalk, a common symbol for a loving couple.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

WHEN FU SHEN WOKE THE NEXT DAY, YAN XIAOHAN HAD LONG since left. That the two of them had parted on bad terms the night before had been noticed to some extent by the servants. Today they were unusually quiet, lest they accidentally get in trouble with him.

Fu Shen had relived the sweet experience of the past, remembered many former events; he didn't feel that last night's argument represented a serious divergence. Everyone had their ambitions, and he couldn't ask of everyone that they walk the "upright path" like him. Moreover, he had a clear idea of Yan Xiaohan's conduct. While it didn't amount to kind and honest, neither was it as heartless and faithless as he himself said.

On this day, an endless stream of visitors came to the Marquis of Jingning Manor. Following Fu Shen's prolonged kneeling at the palace gates, six imperial censors joining forces to present a memorial of admonition to the throne, and the Duke of Ying asking for leave on account of illness and shutting up his manor, countless people in the capital were waiting to see how this drama would wind up. Of course Xiao Xun couldn't very well directly convey the lie Fu Shen had made up. All he could do was hem and haw, say that "The Lord Marquis is convalescing at Lord Yan's manor." But these words truly gave the imagination room to roam. Hearing that the Ministry of Rites was just setting about preparing a wedding for the two of them, people knew that the union between Yan Xiaohan and Fu Shen was already set in stone.

By contrast, Yan Manor was much more tranquil. For one thing, it was because Yan Xiaohan was still at court, and the majority of probing attempts were all deflected by him outside. For another, the Feilong Guard's infamy was too robust. The people willing to have dealings and be friends with him were truly few. Fu Shen's nature was to make himself at home wherever he happened to be. He comfortably passed the days in Yan Manor at his leisure, thinking that this place was a hundred times better than his weed-choked Marquis Manor. There were pretty maids to delight the eyes, and three varied meals a day as well as all kinds of snacks. Apart from having to hold his nose and drink the bitter medicine Shen Yice prescribed, everything could be rated as perfection.

One evening, after getting off duty, Yan Xiaohan walked into the courtyard and heard Fu Shen saying feelingly inside, "... Calligraphy by He Tiao, which gets quotes on the market but never changes hands now. How many people want to get their hands on one but can't? And he just hangs it up right out in the open... Does your master understand it?"

Since Fu Shen's illness had gradually improved, Yan Manor's atmosphere had been a little insufficiently sedate. The maids' laughter, tinkling as silver bells, floated out the half-shut window. Yan Xiaohan stopped in his tracks. He cocked an ear to listen carefully, a feeling that was at once steady and dissatisfied suddenly appearing in his heart.

He thought, somewhat making trouble on purpose, *I'm the one who brings you medicine and gives you water, and I'm the one who ought to join you in appreciating artwork and drinking tea, too. Why will you talk and laugh with the maids but begrudge me even a smile?*

He wanted to take another step forward, but his feet seemed to have been nailed to the ground. The dizziness of the emotions going to his head abruptly cooled, and Yan Xiaohan mulled over the line of thought that had just gone through his mind. It was as if he had bit into a mouthful of nothing but shards of ice. He smiled bitterly, searched his conscience and asked himself, *Why would it be me?*

No matter what, he couldn't take this step. Yan Xiaohan felt like a snail whose shell had been broken. After the pitcher had shattered that night, he could no longer support a suit of composed, self-possessed armor with which to face Fu Shen.

As he thought this, his footsteps changed direction to match his thoughts. He turned and went out of the courtyard. He hadn't expected there to be an especially sharp-eared maid inside. Hearing footsteps, she glanced out just in time to catch him in the act. "Master is back."

Everyone hurried to open the door and welcome him inside. Fu Shen turned his head from in front of the bookshelf. He held a cup of goji and jujube tea in his hands, and there was a lingering smile in the depths of his eyes, as if he had deliberately kept it for him. He said in greeting, "You're back."

Not receiving the cold reception he had imagined, Yan Xiaohan startled. Fu Shen saw that his expression was off and said in concern, "What's wrong? Did something happen?"

He said to the maids, "Go on, withdraw, have the kitchen prepare dinner. I'll have a talk with your master."

His manner and tone really were just like that of this manor's other master. Before, Yan Xiaohan had never imagined that in the future he would marry such a wife, and perhaps he would even have lived out his whole life in solitude. But the scene in front of him was as natural and easy as if made in accordance with his desires, unexpectedly filling in the missing piece in his dreams.

He didn't want to consider this any deeper. He got his emotions in order, sat down across from Fu Shen, and started in on serious business. "The Ministry of Rites has determined the twelfth day of the second month as the wedding date, during the Flower Festival. As I see it, when the imperial edict arranging the marriage has just been issued, going to His Majesty to say you want to return to Beiyan now will certainly earn you a refusal. It's better to wait, wait until the end of the year, then submit a memorial to the throne clearly stating that on the verge of marriage, you earnestly request to return to Yanzhou to pay tribute to your father and uncle and notify all your fellow soldiers. Set out during the first month, return to the capital during the second month. I'm afraid His Majesty will only approve it that way."

Fu Shen pondered briefly, then nodded and said, "That makes sense. Then let's do that."

He abruptly realized that since he had been living with Yan Xiaohan, the frequency with which he said "let's do that" had increased sharply. This feeling was very peculiar. Fu Shen felt none of the dissatisfaction of being deprived of the power of decision-making; rather, he felt that he was being spared worry. Because if it had been him, he would most likely have made the same decisions.

Even more unheard of, these decisions that Fu Shen could find no fault with would be certain to give him many advantages and no disadvantages. As an "outsider," Yan Xiaohan could put himself in his shoes and consider the situation on his account. Once or twice was happenstance, but when it happened over and over, what it hid was profound thoughtfulness and care.

It really feels good not to have to take the trouble myself. Fu Shen slowly sighed to himself. *I'm afraid anyone who gets sincere treatment from him will be spoiled rotten.*

Having finished discussing serious business, the two of them had nothing to say to each other. They sank into an awkward silence. A long moment later, Fu Shen voluntarily picked a topic. "You looked unhappy just now. What happened?"

Yan Xiaohan was sitting in a round-backed armchair, his spine still perfectly upright. Shaking his head, he said, "Nothing."

The odd thing would have been if Fu Shen had believed him, but however clever he was, he still couldn't guess Lord Yan's thoughts, which were like a needle at the bottom of the sea. Tentatively, he said, "Did you sleep badly? Or… are you still angry about the other day?"

Yan Xiaohan's eyebrows moved. He looked a little astonished, but he said nothing.

Fu Shen had more or less seen through him. While he said it was "nothing," written all over his face were the words, *Something's wrong, I won't say what, come cheer me up.*

He thought, *I'm spoiling you.*

But outwardly he continued to ask, "Are you really angry? Because I told you to get out?"

As if this were beneath him, Yan Xiaohan "hmph"ed through his nose.

Fu Shen, holding back a smile, his expression reading, *Since you're asking, I'll tackle the job of cheering you up*, said, "I was wrong, I shouldn't have told you to get out. A great man can afford to be broad-minded, don't squabble with the likes of me, hm?"

Yan Xiaohan looked at him fixedly, staring so hard that Fu Shen was about to break out in gooseflesh. He braced himself and met his eyes. Shortly, Yan Xiaohan abruptly turned his face away and burst out laughing with a snort.

Fu Shen inwardly breathed a sigh of relief. He reached up to touch the roots of his ears. They had heated up a little.

Bewildered, he thought, *What's wrong with me? Why not just let him die mad?*

Yan Xiaohan took a long time to stop laughing. Nothing was left of Fu Shen's feigned affection. He glanced at him and coolly said, "All better now? No more tantrums?"

Yan Xiaohan cupped his hands and frankly said, "All better. Thank you for your consideration, Lord Marquis."

Fu Shen laughed in ridicule and didn't squabble with him. He turned his wheelchair and headed out the door. "How old are you? It's shameful."

That night, once again on good terms, the two of them again occupied the bedroom together. There was no serious business, it was just that Yan Xiaohan was used to coming to look in on him before going to sleep. These last few days, when Fu Shen had dressed or bathed, sat or lain down or gotten up, Yan Xiaohan had been there himself without exception. Only when it came to taking medicine, due to him not being at the manor during the day, had he not watched in person apart from the very first few days. Before bedtime, when a maid came in to bring medicine, Yan Xiaohan just happened to have been sent to the study by Fu Shen to get him a book. When he returned, Fu Shen was leaning against the headboard of the bed, the bowl of medicine on the table already empty.

Yan Xiaohan had a feeling something was off. He gave Fu Shen the book and looked suspiciously at the bowl of medicine. Fu Shen noticed his gaze and casually asked, "What are you looking at?"

Yan Xiaohan turned his face toward him. His gaze was like a dragonfly touching the water, flitting over Fu Shen's face.

"That's not right."

Fu Shen said, "Hm?"

Yan Xiaohan said, "Did you drink the medicine?"

Fu Shen said, "Yes." He pointed to the bowl. "The bowl is right there."

"You're full of it." Yan Xiaohan had already caught him in a lie, but he was still quibbling. As soon as he thought of Fu Shen not taking his own health seriously, Yan Xiaohan flew into a rage. "Should I bring you a mirror so you can take a look at your face? You drank the medicine? Your lips are dry! What did you drink it with, your ears? Did it cure your brain?!"

Fu Shen fell silent.

It was all over. His deceit hadn't worked out. He'd been caught red-handed.

Looking at his speechless appearance, Yan Xiaohan knew that this couldn't be the first time Fu Shen had done such a thing.

Furious, he paced around the room, then finally kicked over a white porcelain spittoon from beside the bed. He looked down, and there it was—he had the evidence.

Fu Shen sat earnestly in bed, his manner in admitting his crime and waiting to be put to death very sincere.

Yan Xiaohan pointed at him, took a deep breath, barely managed to suppress his spleen, and went out to order a servant to prepare another bowl of medicine. He returned to the room, closed the door, and said with a grim look, "Go on, how long has this been going on?"

Fu Shen gave a few dry laughs. "Don't get angry, my cold is better, it doesn't matter very much whether I take the medicine or not..."

"'Doesn't matter'?" Yan Xiaohan asked coldly. "Who told you there was no need to take that medicine? Shen Yice? Or me?"

Fu Shen said nothing.

It was evident that, entirely out of respect for Yan Xiaohan's concern for his health, he was already trying very hard to restrain himself and not quarrel, but that scoundrel devoted to pointing out others' shortcomings still wouldn't stop. He kept prattling on and on. "Ruining your health while you're young and can take it? Haven't you thought about what you'll do when you get old? Don't you know how many injuries you have? If your cold isn't treated properly, when it leaves you prone to illness, it'll be too late for you to understand!"

Fu Shen was getting a headache from his yammering. There was a headstrong, domineering aspect to his personality. No one had dared to scold him for many years. He had been the one in the wrong to start with, but Yan Xiaohan saying this provoked him into mutiny. Fu Shen impatiently waved a hand. "Fine, aren't you done yet? There's no need to lose your temper, I'm not going to leave you a widow before the wedding..."

Yan Xiaohan struck fast as lightning, grabbing his chin. In a low shout, he said, "Don't talk nonsense!"

He was truly furious, the strength he used great. Fu Shen felt that his chin was about to be crushed. But precisely because of this, he at last clearly saw the flash of shock and pain in the depths of Yan Xiaohan's eyes.

His heart instantly softened.

Fu Shen was immune to force but susceptible to softness. When a normally tough person revealed an occasional sliver of weakness, his heart's defenses were especially easy to puncture.

In addition to which, he had been the one in the wrong.

He froze briefly, then covered Yan Xiaohan's right hand, which was holding his chin, and lightly patted it a few times as if consoling him. "Fine, fine, I'm sorry. It was my fault, all right?"

As if Yan Xiaohan had realized that he had given way to impulse, he immediately let him go. But Fu Shen held on, loosely keeping his hand in his own. Out of nowhere came a sense of tender intimacy.

When he lowered his eyes to look, the better part of the anger in his heart was extinguished.

Yan Xiaohan gave a long sigh. "You're infuriating."

Fu Shen rushed to acknowledge his error and apologize, guaranteeing over and over that he had just had a momentary slip of the tongue. In the future he wouldn't blurt things out. Finally, he couldn't resist laughing. Shaking his head, he said, "What's the matter with you lately? Everything makes you angry."

Yan Xiaohan found that while he seemed unapproachable and difficult to move, as long as you were sincerely good to him, Fu Shen could be unusually tolerant and forbearing.

He was aware that he had found the trick to smoothing his ruffled feathers. While he still wore a long face, there was a small curve at the corners of his eyes. He pronounced a chilly judgment: "Fiend in human form."

Considered carefully, the situation had been worsening dramatically ever since he had set out back to the capital. The ambush and assassination attempt, the plots and intrigues, the emperor arranging their marriage… each of these was enough to make a person worry, toss and turn sleeplessly. Why was it instead these petty trifles making two grown men act like children playing house, fighting and making up?

Were they bored?

A person as firm and unyielding as Fu Shen, or as crafty and calculating as Yan Xiaohan, who in the outside world stirred up great events and commanded the situation, when they came back under the same roof, turned out to be flesh and blood, too, with emotions that showed on their faces.

Probably it was only because this was "home."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

NOT LONG AFTER, A MAID BROUGHT IN THE NEW MEDICINE. YAN Xiaohan took it with his own hands and brought it in front of Fu Shen. He had only one word for him: "Drink."

Fu Shen stared at the steaming medicine with hopeless apathy, taking silent breaths.

Seeing him like this, Yan Xiaohan didn't know whether to laugh or cry. He couldn't resist ridiculing him: "Lord Marquis, if your legs weren't crippled, you'd be up on the roof by now, wouldn't you?"

"Leave!" Fu Shen glared at Yan Xiaohan. "Have a heart, stop yammering. Were you born in the year of the old mother hen? Put the medicine there, I can drink it myself!"

Yan Xiaohan really hadn't expected that drinking this medicine would pose such a difficulty for him. After all, in his eyes, Fu Shen had always been a rather self-disciplined person, never recoiling from anything he ought to do, virtually never willful.

He softened his voice and coaxed, "There isn't much medicine in this bowl. Close your eyes and nerve yourself up, it'll be gone in a few mouthfuls, really."

Fu Shen turned his head away in pain.

"Is the medicine too bitter for you? Is it that bad?" Yan

Xiaohan raised the bowl and tried it himself. He frowned. He thought that it was a little bitter, but not so bad as to be unbearable. Why would Fu Shen resist like this?

"This isn't right." Seeing Fu Shen's lips and face both turning white, his forehead furrowed, forcing himself to bear up, Yan Xiaohan supposed that the smell of the medicine had turned his stomach, so he put the medicine bowl aside, took his hands, and put his fingers together to gently rub the Nei guan acupoints on his wrists. He tentatively said, "Even an ordinary person wouldn't have such a major reaction, never mind you. Is there some uncomfortable secret? Can you tell me about it?"

Fu Shen's hands in his grip were limp, like the outspread paws of a small animal. He didn't evade, only seemed a little dejected, not very willing to bring up the past. "It's nothing, really. You see, when I was young, my health was poor. I often drank medicine. My mother died early, and the nursemaid didn't especially care about me. Seeing me unwilling to drink medicine, she would just pinch my nose and force it down. Whenever she did that, I would throw it up. Later it gradually turned into a bad habit. I'd throw up when I ate anything."

Yan Xiaohan's eyes cooled as he listened. He softly asked, "Didn't your… family find out?"

Fu Shen's lip curled. "My father was at the border then, often unable to come home. Who would there have been to pay attention to me? Later it was my Second Uncle who noticed something was wrong. He got people to keep an eye on that nursemaid in secret and finally saved me from her clutches."

He sighed and candidly said, "Actually, it's not like I can't drink it. It's just that I get irritated and don't want to drink it."

A warm sensation came from his wrists. Yan Xiaohan practiced martial arts, his fingers wouldn't be soft at all, but the strength he applied to kneading was perfectly gauged, giving imperceptible comfort. Fu Shen used this bit of warmth to prepare himself. He said to himself that he couldn't avoid it.

Therefore, he leaned over and reached out to take the medicine bowl.

Contrary to his expectations, Yan Xiaohan uncharacteristically held him back.

Fu Shen looked up at him dubiously. Yan Xiaohan had been sitting on the round stool across from the bed, but now he put the medicine at the bedside, stood up, and sat on the edge of the bed, leaning against the railing. He said, "This one today is the last bowl. Tomorrow I'll have Shen Yice prescribe you pills instead."

Fu Shen thought, *Pills it is, then. But why are you sitting so close?*

Yan Xiaohan laughed. There was some indefinable embarrassment in his tone. "You probably don't remember… Actually, when you were unconscious before, you could drink medicine."

Fu Shen said, "Hm?"

"I fed it to you myself," said Yan Xiaohan.

Fu Shen was dumbfounded.

Had he really been unconscious? Why did he feel like he had amnesia?

"What are you up to?" Fu Shen said warily. "Going to use force? You're ready to give this room up as a loss?"

Yan Xiaohan couldn't resist a smile. "Relax, I'm not planning on forcing you. Come, come here."

Half-trusting and half-suspicious, Fu Shen shifted slightly toward him. Yan Xiaohan said, "Turn around, with your back to me."

Fu Shen did as he said. He had been sitting up perfectly straight in bed before. Yan Xiaohan pulled his shoulders, pressing back firmly. Fu Shen fell face up in his arms.

He had been ready for bed, having already removed his outer robe. He wore only a thin inner robe of white silk, and his hair was loose. He was completely defenseless. Through a single layer of cloth, Fu Shen immediately felt the firm, warm body pressed close to his back, with another person's breathing distinctly audible. The smell of the medicine was bitter, but it couldn't hide the agarwood scent curling outward from Yan Xiaohan's collar.

Fu Shen began to struggle as if his tail had been stepped on. Sternly, he said, "Yan Xiaohan! Are you tired of living?!"

"Settle down, don't flail." Yan Xiaohan leaned back against the headboard, holding him up in a half-reclining posture with his left shoulder and chest, bowl in his left hand and spoon in his right, simply and effectively holding Fu Shen firmly in his arms. When he lowered his head, his chin touched the hair at Fu Shen's temple. "Do you understand now? At the beginning, this was how I fed you. I wasn't taking advantage of you. It's hard to say who was getting the upper hand."

Fu Shen remembered all of it.

While he had been in a daze, running a high fever that wouldn't come down, there had in fact been a person who had held him again and again, personally blew on the medicine to cool it, and fed it to him one mouthful at a time. He had struggled, but that person had been extraordinarily gentle and patient, nothing like the rough and heavy-handed nursemaid in his memories. There had been a person who gently coaxed him, even brought the porcelain spoon up to his lips lightly, and when he finished feeding him the medicine would feed him another spoonful of lightly flavored honey water.

Three bowls of medicine a day hadn't seemed so hard to swallow then.

With the skill that comes of practice, Yan Xiaohan adjusted his posture to a suitable one. "Let's try and see whether it'll work again. Just this once, it won't happen again. Come, open your mouth."

For the first time in his life, Fu Shen wanted to find a place to hide, but he was trapped within the small space of a pair of arms. A spoonful of medicine was soon brought up to his mouth. The movement was gentle and slow, but uncompromisingly waiting for him to part his lips. Suddenly, as if another consciousness had taken over, without regard for his intellectual wariness, his body reacted according to those old memories.

When the first mouthful of medicine slid down his throat, he heard Yan Xiaohan laugh softly over his head, as if he were disgruntled but couldn't help being indulgent. "After all that back-and-forth, you just needed someone to wait upon you... eldest young master."

Fu Shen poked him with his elbow, seeming dissatisfied, but perhaps because he used very little force, it was more like the false protest of someone who was actually agreeing. This poke of the elbow was full of suggestiveness.

So what if he was an eldest young master?

The eldest young master had fallen into his hands.

With his cooperation, the bowl of medicine was soon empty. Fu Shen, like a consummate lord, quietly asked for water without so much as raising his eyelids. Yan Xiaohan held him with his left hand and brought a teacup up to his mouth. Fu Shen drank a mouthful from his hand, then pursed his lips and said, "It's not sweet."

"Aren't you finicky?" Yan Xiaohan put the teacup back where it had come from and grumbled half in earnest, "You just drank medicine, anything you drink now will be sweet."

Fu Shen seemed to laugh, but because he was pressed into his arms, it sounded like a groan.

Yan Xiaohan was about to put Fu Shen back on the bed, but unexpectedly the person he was holding all of a sudden quietly turned, reached out his arms, and put them around his waist, resting his head against the hollow of his shoulder, and in this posture, curled up in his arms, closed his eyes and went to sleep.

Yan Xiaohan instantly stilled.

The candle flickered, casting light on the beautiful pair.

There was no need to speak. Both of them were well aware of what this moment meant.

—His heart had been touched.

* * *

One month later.

The carriage stopped outside Yan Manor's side gate. Fu Shen did not wish to attract notice on this trip, so he didn't even leave by the main gate. He was traveling light, with only a few dozen bodyguards accompanying him. Xiao Xun carried Fu Shen into the carriage on his back, put away the wheelchair, and asked with a pretense of casualness, "General, isn't Lord Yan coming to see you off?"

Fu Shen's gaze flickered at having the weight on his mind touched. Then he simply closed his eyes and carelessly said, "There's no need for him to see me off. Is everything put away? Let's set out."

Xiao Xun was extremely perceptive. He kept thinking that Fu Shen's manner was off. He couldn't say it was bad, just a little strange. It was as if he had suddenly become distanced from that Lord Yan, yet there was no estrangement to be seen between them.

But he only dared to think these words inwardly. He didn't dare to ask Fu Shen what was actually going on. Xiao Xun leapt onto his horse and took the lead in setting off. The carriage slowly began to move after him. Yan Manor's servants watched them go until they were too far to be seen, then finally returned inside and pulled the side gate shut.

When the party had left the city gates, before they could go far, they suddenly heard urgent hoofbeats behind them. A man and a horse came toward them like the wind. Xiao Xun pulled up his horse and stopped. He recognized the official robe of the Feilong Guard from a distance and immediately felt an intense headache. He muttered to himself, "What are you two up to? Didn't you say he wasn't seeing you off?"

Fu Shen was resting with his eyes closed inside the carriage. He had nearly fallen asleep. When he felt the carriage slowly stop, he didn't open his eyes, only languidly asked, "Chongshan?"

Next the carriage's curtain was pulled up, and a figure accompanied by a thread of daylight leapt into the carriage. When Fu Shen opened his eyes, he was slightly surprised. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to see you before you left after all," Yan Xiaohan said warmly. "I won't feel at ease otherwise."

The two of them had in fact been somewhat awkward lately. To be precise, it had started that night. Their frames of mind had both undergone a change, and they both needed time to think things through. This kind of drifting apart made a person toss and turn, but it wasn't a torment.

Because they both knew what conclusion was waiting up ahead. It was just that the reality wasn't living up to the name. The worst outcome couldn't be worse than the present. When a person was already standing at the bottom of a valley, any direction he went in would be for the better.

Going deeper, to expand on the daydream, perhaps they would have to thank Emperor Yuantai for his exceptional insight, which had bestowed on them the perfect match.

When Fu Shen saw him, he relaxed inwardly, but he kept up the act outwardly. Because there were ears everywhere, while they were inside a carriage, they still couldn't go too far overboard in their words and gestures. He calmly said, "In the past, I traveled between the northern frontier and the capital eighty times if not a hundred. What is there that Your Honor can't feel easy about? Go, you have a post to fulfill. Don't delay too long."

Yan Xiaohan said, "After we part today, the next time we see each other, it will be next year. I hope the Lord Marquis will strictly adhere to the marriage contract and honor his promise."

Xiao Xun, who had his ears pricked up listening in from outside the carriage, felt a chill come over his back. He thought, *Is this Lord Yan a dolt? He knows perfectly well the Lord Marquis is unhappy about the arranged marriage. Why can't he leave well enough alone?*

Inside the carriage, Yan Xiaohan suddenly pulled Fu Shen over and hugged him tightly. He lowered his head and said into his ear, "You must be careful when you go outside. The north is frigid. Look after your own health, don't make me worry."

Fu Shen gave a rare soft "Mhm" and half-jokingly pressed on his back. "Our hearts are as one."

The embrace was warm, their temples pressed against each other. Their heartbeats gradually synchronized. Fu Shen gently pressed his cheek against Yan Xiaohan's, extremely affectionate, as if for the first time in his life knowing the meaning of "tender feelings like water, the wedding day ahead like a dream."

After a long embrace, he finally pushed Yan Xiaohan away, casually straightened out the wrinkles that had been pressed into his collar, and indicated for him to get out of the carriage. At the same time, he sent him away in extremely arrogant and aggressive tones: "Lord Yan can rest easy. At next year's Flower Festival, I will personally come to the door to fetch the bride. Prepare a sizable dowry. Do not let me down!"

Everyone, Yan Xiaohan included, was at a loss for words.

Xiao Xun surreptitiously felt for the sword at his waist, making ready in case a fight started to charge forward at once to mediate in favor of one side. He couldn't let the Lord Marquis get beaten to death for his loose tongue.

Two days later, the carriage drove into Yanzhou.

The surrounding scenery became more and more familiar. Apart from the bare trees and the snow lying all over the ground, there was no difference from when he had left in the fall. Fu Shen had been born in the capital, but he had grown up on the northern border. Yanzhou was like his second home. The familiar sights made him relax in spite of himself. He even became interested in looking out the carriage's small window to get an occasional look at the people passing by outside.

They were traveling on the trade road. The whole way, they passed by towns and villages of all sizes. In the evening they stopped over in Lianqi Town. While passing through a small alley, Fu Shen smelled the sweet, cool scent of wine, which piqued his interest. Therefore, he ordered Xiao Xun to turn around and prepare to carry out an investigation.

Xiao Xun, with a bitter look, tried desperately to obstruct him. "My lord, you cannot drink alcohol! We're about to get back and see Army Doctor Du!"

Fu Shen was completely indifferent. "Relax, anything I drink tonight will be digested by morning. He won't notice."

Xiao Xun said, "L-lord Yan also doesn't want you to drink!"

Fu Shen's eager smile froze.

He pointed resentfully at Xiao Xun. "Which way does your elbow bend? Traitor! Beiyan is my domain. However long Yan Xiaohan's reach may be, can his control extend here? Huh? All of you keep your mouths shut tight. If half a word of this gets out, you're the one I'll be asking about it!"

Xiao Xun couldn't resist talking back. "The Feilong Guard's information is good. Isn't it more likely than not that he'll find out?"

The flames of Fu Shen's bluster were instantly cut in half.

"Chongshan, you're still young. You don't understand the dangers of the human heart," Fu Shen said earnestly. "Between myself and Yan Xiaohan, there isn't merely a struggle as to which of the two of us will come out on top. More than that, there is the contest between the Beiyan Army and the Feilong Guard. If I allow myself to be controlled by him in places outside the capital, I'll be henpecked before my wife has even crossed the threshold! If it gets out, how will the men of the Beiyan Army hold their heads up before the Feilong Guard?"

Xiao Xun was surprised over and over as he listened, but thinking it over carefully, it did in fact make sense. He said slowly, "The Lord Marquis is wise."

After the "not henpecked" Marquis of Jingning, who could hold up heaven and earth, got through duping the silly child, he rolled his wheelchair into the little alley with a clear conscience.

The wine shop was deep in the alley and took up little space. It had only four sets of tables and chairs and a counter set out.

The proprietress was selling the drinks. She was just bustling around with her head down. Fu Shen picked a table with slightly more space and tapped lightly on the tabletop. Raising his voice, he said, "Shopkeeper, what wines do you have?"

The woman behind the counter quickly raised her head and looked at him. She was just about to speak, but when she got a clear look at his face, it was as if she had been struck dead by lightning. She stood stock-still in place.

Not hearing a response, Fu Shen turned his head to look, and just happened to meet her eyes.

Instantly, an unspeakable sense of familiarity surged up in his heart. "You're…"

"You are…"

The two of them spoke simultaneously. Fu Shen stopped, but the woman asked shakily, "Sir, is your surname… Fu?"

A tearful smile, happy surprise—this was clearly the appearance of someone at a complete loss for how to react. There was absolutely no malice here. Though Fu Shen's identity had been exposed, he didn't try to conceal himself. He nodded.

The next moment, the woman stumbled out from behind the counter and immediately prostrated herself before him. "This lowly one was saved by your actions in the past, narrowly escaping death. Heaven has been merciful and given me the fortune to meet my benefactor once again. Superior benefactor, please receive my worship!"

"Wait." Fu Shen had yet to remember who she actually was. "Miss… might I ask your name?"

The woman's tears were already pouring down. Sobbing, she said, "Youlan Manor on Mount Baoyan in Huanren County, the miscarriage of justice in Lord Jin's case. Seven years have passed, and he has yet to be exonerated."

Fu Shen's pupils contracted sharply. It was as if he had been attacked heavily head-on. The blood drained from his face. He very rarely forgot himself like this. He asked in disbelief, "Are you… Caiyue?"

This name was like a hurricane, instantly wrecking many years of stubbornness and bias. Memories surged to the sky, immediately drowning Fu Shen. Life and death, sorrow and joy, ups and downs all pushed him into that distant period of the past he had not dared to recall, had been unwilling to mention.

That was the first time in his too-short youth that his heart had been trampled to pieces.

—And it was the hard knot between him and Yan Xiaohan that had yet to be untied to this day.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

EIGHTEENTH YEAR OF YUANTAI, EARLY FALL.

Youlan Villa was a known scenic spot on Huanren County's Mount Baoyan. The previous owner had been a refined scholar of the last generation. This person had attained the post of prime minister. After resigning, he had purchased this manor in the capital's outskirts and retired there. Because that original owner had dearly loved orchids all his life, all kinds of rare orchids grew in the garden, so the manor was named after orchids—Youlan Villa.

After the villa's owner passed away, the family's descendants were prosecuted for accepting bribes. Their property was searched and confiscated by the court, and Youlan Villa was also among the seized assets. Later, the late emperor had awarded this place to the previous generation's Duke of Ying, Fu Jian. Since then, it had been passed down through the generations, becoming the personal property of the Fu family.

Huanren County was only some dozens of li from the capital. Mount Baoyan had many dense forests and valleys, a good place for hunting. The heat of summer had faded, and a crowd of idle rich kids arranged to go on an excursion to hunt on the mountain. Fu Shen found himself heckled and forced to act as official host. All he could do was dispatch servants to clean up, make ready to welcome the guests. Because of this, Madam Qin had been displeased, sulking around the house every day casting aspersions and making allusions, saying he was a wasteful spendthrift. Fu Shen didn't feel like going out to socialize, and he was annoyed to death by her. He was just sharpening his sword, planning to find a pretext for losing his temper, when he suddenly heard a servant come to report that his Second Uncle had come back from the northern frontier.

Fu Tingxin was like the stabilizing force of the world. In a few words he had settled Madam Qin and told Fu Shen to relax and boldly go out to play. Now that he had come back, Fu Shen was even more unwilling to leave. Fu Tingxin had no children, and Fu Shen had grown up in his presence. He was the one who had personally taught him literary and martial arts; he was closer to him than his own father.

"Second Uncle," Fu She said, sitting inelegantly on the table in Fu Tingxin's study, swinging his legs, "autumn and winter are a critical period for border defense. Why have you suddenly come back?"

Fu Tingxin was just ransacking his luggage looking for something. Without so much as looking up, he said, "Court business."

Fu Shen guessed it immediately. "The Palace Secretariat Vice-President Jin Yunfeng conspiring to rebel and going to prison?"

Fu Tingxin quickly straightened. "How do you know about that?!"

"That bunch of young masters who want to trample over our garden told me." Fu Shen grinned. "Second Uncle, I'm not a kid anymore. I didn't understand things before, but of course I understand now."

Fu Tingxin put a hand to his forehead. "Shen'er, take a piece of advice from your Second Uncle. Never smile like that in public. You look silly."

Fu Shen was speechless.

Fu Tingxin simply tossed his luggage aside and forgot it. He sat on the desk just as inelegantly as Fu Shen and quietly asked, "How do you see this matter?"

"Me?" Fu Shen said. "Well, I... just see it as being there."

Fu Tingxin swatted him on the back of the head and angrily said, "Speak properly!"

Fu Shen leaned forward from the blow and touched the back of his head discontentedly. "I only took it for gossip before. It's nothing to do with our family! Jin Yunfeng was only charged because he was implicated in the conspiracy case of Director Han Yuantong of the Jiangzhe Fleet. He is the vice-president of the Palace Secretariat, after all, a position level with the prime minister's. He was acting in concert with Han Yuantong, one on the outside and one at court, everything was going just fine..."

Hearing this much, Fu Tingxin knew that he was just making things up. He really couldn't take it anymore. "What the hell are you talking about... Shut up, I'll only say this once. How much enlightenment you get from it depends entirely on you.

"Director Han Yuantong of the Jiangzhe Fleet falls under the command of the East Sea Navy's Provincial Commander Sa Zhimu, while the area of Jiangzhe is the fiefdom of Prince An. Once Han Yuantong's conspiracy to rebel was discovered, not only did Sa Zhimu have to submit a memorial to the throne begging to retire from his post, His Majesty also got it into his head to dissolve Prince An's fiefdom."

Fu Shen said, "What does that have to do with Jin Yunfeng?"

Fu Tingxin said, "The reason Jin Yunfeng was charged is that he repeatedly submitted memorials to the throne opposing the dissolution of Prince An's fiefdom, asking His Majesty not to injure his own brother. Given his position, this wouldn't have been a major offense to begin with. The trouble lies in the fact that he used to be the Hanlin Academy's Imperial Lecturer and gave lectures to Prince An. With this connection, why do you think His Majesty wanted to charge him?"

Fu Shen said, "On the surface, His Majesty is taking care of

Han Yuantong's rebellion plot, but in reality he wants to retake Prince An's fiefdom, and take the opportunity to beat down the East Sea Navy. Because vassal princes spread throughout the country and generals defending the borders… are his two greatest fears."

Fu Tingxin was struck to the heart by the incisive summation of these "two greatest fears." Clutching his chest, he said with a bitter smile, "My dear nephew, you certainly are direct."

But Fu Shen didn't take up his joke. His scorching gaze was fixed on Fu Tingxin. "I just thought of something. Isn't there someone in our family with a connection to both of those?"

"Your thoughts have gone astray." Fu Tingxin promptly dispelled his apprehension. "I've returned in order to submit a memorial to the throne pleading on Mr. Jin's behalf. When I was His Highness Prince Su's study companion, we had a friendship between teacher and student for a time. It would be inexcusable for me to say nothing under the circumstances."

Fu Shen wasn't having it. "As I see it, it's His Highness Prince Su who had a 'friendship between teacher and student' with Jin Yunfeng, but he can't very well say anything, so he's making you take his place, right? How many favors does he owe you? When is he planning on finally settling the debt? If he can't afford to pay it back, then can he sell himself and be my Second Aunt?"

Fu Tingxin didn't get annoyed at his ridicule. Calm and self-possessed, he said, "Good question. I suggest that you ask him yourself next time you see him."

"Tsk-tsk, I bet you two have laid another trap for me." Fu Shen already had experience being caught in their traps. "I won't ask, you can go on living as a bachelor!"

In fact, they both knew that this was only an unrealizable joke. Fu Tingxin was a general guarding the border passes, and Prince Su was the vassal prince of a territory, those two greatest fears. They didn't even dare to act too close in front of others; openly marrying was completely out of the question.

Fu Tingxin raised a hand to pat him on the head and said, sighing, "Sometimes I really wish you would hurry and grow up so I can hand the burden over to you and be free and unfettered myself. But I also want you to never grow up, never have to face these restraints."

Fu Shen thought nothing of it. Carelessly, he said, "I don't need any more fame and fortune. In the future I'll calmly defend the border and beat the Tartars, be a lone official. However petty His Majesty may be, he still won't have cause to harbor suspicions about me."

Hearing this childish speech, Fu Tingxin raised a hand and slapped him on the back. "Well, aren't you awesome! I have some letters in my luggage, go find them for me."

Fu Shen jumped off the table and sullenly went to rummage through the luggage.

Fu Tingxin, eyes fixed on his back, smiled slightly. There was some imperceptible grief in his smile. He thought, *Little whelp, did you read all those history books for nothing? Don't you know the meaning of the term 'unwarranted?'*

After a moment's grief, he solaced himself breezily: *Forget it, let him be childish. Da-ge and I are still here.*

This was autumn in the eighteenth year of Yuantai, a period of calm and tranquility.

No one could anticipate how quickly fortunes changed, how fate toyed with people.

In the nineteenth year of Yuantai, Fu Tingzhong was assassinated by the Eastern Tartars. The following year, Fu Tingxin died in battle at the northern frontier. In the same year, the eighteen-year-old Fu Shen put on his armor and left the capital, stepping onto the battlefield of the north.

In the twenty-fifth year of Yuantai, Fu Shen returned wounded to the capital and had a marriage arranged for him by Emperor Yuantai.

The disorder filling the study that day, the dialogue known only to uncle and nephew, a deeply hidden love, the uncle's hopes and wishes, the boy's outspoken declarations… all had ultimately become unreachable as a flower in a mirror, the moon reflected in water.

However great the bitterness and deep the hatred that would follow, at that time, Fu Shen had still been a naïve and brash young lordling, with a heart incapable of holding heaviness and gloom. Fu Tingxin told him to go out and play, so he grandly took his band of disreputable friends up Mount Baoyan.

Those close to Fu Shen were all sons of aristocrats. The current dynasty didn't confer titles upon civilian officials; most of the aristocrats came of military lineages. These half-grown boys spent all their time wielding swords and batons. They couldn't recite a single quatrain when faced with a goddess, never mind when faced with a "gentleman among flowers." The big monkeys regarded the orchids dispiritedly for a while, rested and reorganized briefly, had lunch, and in the afternoon, on hearing that the drinking water had been prepared, they were in an immediate rush to lead their horses and carry their falcons, cavorting into the mountain.

There were no vicious beasts on Mount Baoyan. It was mostly deer, hares, and pheasants, with rumors that wild boars sometimes appeared. Fu Shen rode slowly through the forest, from time to time drawing his bow and taking aim; each arrow hit its mark. His archery skills had been learned among the Beiyan Army and were a little wasted on chickens and bunnies. Just as he was feeling bored, a rustling came from the dense forest to the right up ahead. There was the sound of hoofbeats. Yi Siming and Fu Shen, on horseback, exchanged a look at a distance. They simultaneously drew their bows and took aim at the dark form in the thicket.

Fu Shen's fingers squeezed the bowstring tightly. He narrowed his eyes. Gradually the outlines of the creature came clear. He startled.

"Wait!"

He immediately called out to stop Yi Siming, but it was too late; his arrow had already left the string. Fu Shen had no time to hold it back. Without so much as taking aim, he shot. His arrow described an almost perfectly straight trajectory, quick and accurate. With a click, it knocked Yi Siming's feather-fletched arrow aside.

At first Yi Siming was stunned. He was just about to get angry when he suddenly heard Fu Shen cry out, "Who's there? Come out!"

The thicket rustled. The dark form slowly grew taller and wider, and at last stood up—it turned out to be a thin, frail woman holding a cloth-wrapped bundle in her arms.

"Who are you? Why are you hiding here?"

She fell to her knees on the ground and, trembling with fear, said, "I... I was going to Song Village... to visit relatives, and carelessly lost my way and came here by mistake. When I heard the sound of hooves, I thought there were robbers, and that's... that's why I hid."

Yi Siming urged his horse toward her, looked her over from top to bottom, and said suspiciously, "From your dress and bearing, you don't seem like a village woman from the countryside. You seem more like you've come from a wealthy family's household... What are you holding there?"

Hearing this, the woman's whole body shook. She didn't answer. She kept her head resolutely lowered, only holding the bundle in her arms tighter.

Fu Shen took a few steps closer, raised the woman's chin with his bow, and coldly said, "Let go."

With his eyes fixed on her, cold sweat rose on the woman's back. She was so scared her whole body went limp. Fu Shen easily lifted the outside of the cloth-wrapped bundle she held, revealing the brocade swaddling clothes inside.

She was holding an infant!

Fu Shen frowned. "A kidnapper?"

As he spoke, he heard the sound of several people approaching. They formed a circle, looking at the woman. They saw that while her face was covered in dirt and tears, it didn't obscure her dainty charm. While this crowd couldn't write poetry to a goddess, that didn't mean they couldn't tell beauty from ugliness. One romantic instantly felt compassion. "Miss, have you encountered some difficulty?"

Fu Shen said, "An unmarried woman carrying an infant, taking mountain paths instead of the public road, stammering evasively when talking about your background. As I see it, you most likely have something on your conscience. Out with it, just where did you get that child?"

Someone suddenly said, "Hey, now that you mention it, when we left the city, I think we saw a wanted notice on the bulletin at the city gates for the escaped slave of a guilty minister's household. Could it be her?"

"A guilty minister?" said Fu Shen. "Who?"

"The one who went to prison for plotting a rebellion recently," that person said. "Vice-President Jin, Jin Yunfeng."

Fu Shen was confounded.

The woman was shaking like a timid rabbit. She was not yet two decades old. The greatest courage she had exercised in her life had been in secretly fleeing the capital. Now, faced with a crowd of young aristocrats on horseback with bows drawn, she had no excess courage to contend with them. She hesitated for a long moment, then finally said in a trembling voice, "This lowly one is Caiyue, a slave girl in Vice-President Jin's house in the capital. The child in the swaddling clothes is our little master..."

Fu Shen had already understood. "You ran away with the child."

"I beg you young gentlemen to let me live." Crying, Caiyue repeatedly kowtowed to the group. "This child is the only surviving member of the Jin bloodline. He nearly fell to his death when the house was searched... My master was thrown in prison unjustly. The women of the family couldn't stand the disgrace and hanged themselves all together in front of the hall! This lowly one took the child and fled the capital at risk to my life. I was chased the whole way by the court's men.

There was no other way, that's why I fled into the mountain..."

Her crying was truly pitiful, but the Jin Yunfeng affair concerned the major crime of rebellion. If one became saddled with the crime of "harboring a criminal," it could easily turn fatal.

But this group of sons of aristocrats was still young, after all, their benevolence unchecked, and their families were quite powerful and influential. They had never come to grief. It was easy for hot blood to rush to their heads. Only Yi Siming was habitually prudent. He didn't want to get mixed up with other people's business. So he turned his gaze on Fu Shen.

Fu Shen thought of his Second Uncle coming back all this way to plead on Jin Yunfeng's behalf. Now the Jin family's slave girl had by coincidence run into him. Was this an obscure sign that the child ought to live? After thinking it over back and forth, he finally stepped aside, shook his head at Yi Siming, and instructed the servant who had accompanied them, "Take her back to the manor, get her a change of clothes. If anyone asks, say she's a maid sent over by my maternal relatives. Don't say anything else. Go on."

The servant left to obey. Yi Siming's brow was still tightly furrowed. He said anxiously, "This woman's identity is critical. If she truly does have some important connection to the case, we would be in serious trouble."

"Yes." Fu Shen nodded understandingly. "A person undertakes the consequences for his own actions. Set your mind at ease, Yi-xiong, if this is exposed, I will on no account involve any of you."

The effects of these words were excellent. Someone immediately pounded his own chest thunderously. "What are you saying, Fu-xiong?! How can we allow you to bear the responsibility alone? If something happens, count me in!"

Everyone echoed him one after another. Yi Siming was completely helpless. Fu Shen smiled and said, consoling, "No need to lose your heads, everyone, carry on with what you were doing. Mount Baoyan is my family's personal property. Even if pursuing troops want to search it, they will still have to ask the owners for permission."

Hardly had he spoken than the sound of orderly hoofbeats came from a distance. Like a peal of thunder, the sound came closer, bearing down menacingly. In no time, it was already upon them.

Fu Shen's eyesight was excellent. Looking from a distance, he recognized the official robes of silver embroidery on a dark background—

The Feilong Guard!

Damn it! This slap to the face had come too soon!

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE NEWCOMERS WERE IN FRONT OF THEM IN THE BLINK OF AN eye. Fu Shen and the others held their breaths and made ready one after another while inwardly praising their luck: luckily that woman had left already, or else the two sides would have bumped into each other; there would have been no escape then.

The mountain road was narrow. The Feilong Guards were forced to stop. Fu Shen made up his mind to delay them for a while. None of the young lordlings made way. Someone spoke: "Who goes there?"

A white horse came through the crowd. The man on the horse nodded urbanely and said, "By order of the emperor, the Feilong Guard must capture a criminal who has committed an offense against the court. Might I ask whether you have seen any suspicious individuals while on the mountain, gentlemen?"

Each and every one of the young aristocrats had eyes growing on top of his head and looked at him with their nostrils. Someone quipped, "Hey, what a production. What serious criminal is it whose escape has brought out the mighty Feilong Guard?"

The man didn't get annoyed. With polite firmness, he answered, “I don’t dare to accept your erroneous praise, sir. I am only acting under orders.”

The young man who had asked the question choked, his expression turning ugly. Fu Shen was afraid the two sides would start fighting and quickly spoke up, conciliating. “We have only come here by chance whilst amusing ourselves. We have not seen the criminal Your Honor spoke of.”

The man looked at him. His originally cold and indifferent eyes and brows unexpectedly took on a trace of a smile. He cheerfully said, “So it’s Young Master Fu. How long since we last met.”

He’d thought this man looked familiar! Fu Shen looked at him fixedly and finally remembered. Wasn’t this the imperial guard who had tossed him a twin lotus in the street that day?

Yi Siming had been right. He really was a Feilong Guard.

“Officer… Yan.” Fu Shen’s emotions were complicated. “It’s an honor to meet you at last.”

All the rich young masters were staring at the two of them, many of them bewildered, not knowing exactly when Fu Shen had crossed paths with a member of the Feilong Guard.

Yan Xiaohan slowly regarded all of them. That light gaze seemed to have physical form, pressing down so hard these guilty young lordlings’ backs broke out in cold sweat. He smiled easily. “The fugitive is involved in a major case of rebellion. All thoroughfares inside and outside of the capital have guards posted to interrogate and examine. A reward has been offered. Those who dare to harbor or aid this criminal will be seen as co-conspirators.

“The Feilong Guard has pursued the criminal to Huanren County, but she escaped us. There are high mountains and deep forests here. Finding a person is difficult. If you are able to aid us in apprehending this criminal, I will certainly notify the court and request recognition for your merit.”

This was Fu Shen’s first time harboring an escaped criminal. He kept thinking there was some implication behind Yan Xiaohan's words; they were malicious. He couldn't help thinking to himself, *Has he already realized it?*

After Yan Xiaohan had spoken, the mountain forest was silent. No one answered. Shortly, someone snickered, and, not without mockery, said, "Eunuch's bastard, you really think you're somebody."

The voice wasn't loud, but because there was unusual quiet now, everyone heard it.

Yan Xiaohan's expression instantly turned grim. His hand involuntarily went for the sword hilt at his side. He was a very strange person. The more furious he was, the more soft-spoken he became, as if afraid of frightening someone. "I was wondering who that was. Turns out it's Second Young Master Xie. An honor to meet you at last."

Xie Qianfan, the second son of the Count of Qingyi, snorted, straightened his neck, and didn't look at him.

Yan Xiaohan said, "Today is my first time seeing the Second Young Master. Indeed, you are a young prodigy—newborn calves do not fear tigers. You truly aren't anything like your honored older brother."

Vein after vein rose on Xie Qianfan's neck.

Yan Xiaohan continued slowly, "I heard that your honored older brother was transferred to the position of captain among the capital's troops last year. His future prospects are boundless. A distinguished father like the Count of Qingyi must have an equally distinguished son, who will be able to carry on his legacy. One assumes he has nothing to regret."

Xie Qianfan's face quickly went from white to red to green. It was as if he had been slapped in the face.

The Count of Qingyi's eldest son Xie Bailou was not the issue of his first wife, but he was quite accomplished, while his second son and issue of his first wife Xie Qianfan was a useless rich kid. Not only that, Xie Er's mother was very unloved by the Count of Qingyi. The Count of Qingyi favored his eldest son over his second son and had often threatened to pass his title on to the eldest. Xie Bailou surpassed Xie Qianfan in every respect; Xie Er had practically become his enemy. His family and close friends didn't dare to mention the name "Xie Bailou" in front of him.

Yan Xiaohan bringing up this matter in front of everyone was no different than slapping him right in the face, precisely and viciously prodding the scar he was most unwilling to have mentioned.

Xie Er saw red on the spot. In his fury, he actually attacked without another word. He raised his hunting bow, took aim at Yan Xiaohan, and fired!

Yan Xiaohan had been prepared for this. He suddenly drew his sword and lightly knocked the arrow aside. He leapt and landed in front of Xie Qianfan. The snow-bright sheen of his sword was like the river of stars pouring down to earth, cutting straight down.

"Xie Er!"

Yi Siming and Fu Shen moved simultaneously, one charging over to hold back Xie Qianfan, the other throwing himself forward to obstruct Yan Xiaohan. Fu Shen was completely unarmed. In his urgency, he pulled the bow from his back and deftly blocked Yan Xiaohan's attack, which bore down with the weight of Mount Tai.

"Slow down!"

Fu Shen's wrists ached sharply, so shaken by the great strength of the blow that they trembled nonstop. Angrily, he cried, "Are you crazy? He spoke wrongly, so he can apologize to you. Why react so aggressively?!"

Yan Xiaohan's savagery didn't abate. With a snort, he said, "He speaks recklessly, without minding his tongue. If you offend someone you shouldn't have offended, you should be prepared to die!"

Fu Shen struggled to contend against Yan Xiaohan, holding off the full force of his attack. But however sturdy a bow might be, in the end it still couldn't match up to the Feilong Guard sword forged of fine steel. Shortly, there came a faint crack. The bow in Fu Shen's hands couldn't hold out any longer. It snapped abruptly into two halves.

Lamentation flashed through his eyes. This bow had been a birthday gift from Fu Tingxin and had been with Fu Shen for many years, and now it had unexpectedly broken here at Yan Xiaohan's hands. But right now he didn't have attention to spare for much else. Holding the bowstring with both hands, he twisted and pulled at Yan Xiaohan's sword, managing to turn the sword's point aside.

The Feilong Guards eyed them with hostility. When Yan Xiaohan had struck, they had precipitously restrained Xie Er. The group of young aristocrats with Yi Siming at their head weren't pacifists, either. Everyone had drawn their weapons. The two sides were about to launch into battle, and on the other hand, the two of them had already gone a good distance in their fight. Fu Shen was hard pressed by Yan Xiaohan's impenetrable strikes. Furiously, he shouted, "Sword!" Yi Siming immediately threw a sword. Fu Shen dashed several steps, twisted, launched himself off a tree and leapt into the air, light as a swallow. He reached out and seized the hilt of the sword, parrying an attack coming straight at him.

Fu Shen instantly turned his disadvantageous position around. His sword came at Yan Xiaohan like wind and rain!

Yan Xiaohan was forced to retreat several steps by the force of his sharp blow, yet he still had leisure to sigh in admiration. "Truly worthy of the son of a famous general. Well done."

Since the moment Fu Shen had used the bowstring to twist the blade, Yan Xiaohan had restrained his contempt. His ability to become Duan Linglong's adopted son and occupy his current position hinged not only on his scheming and trickery, but also on martial skills that could overcome the North Yamen Imperial Guard. If it had been that useless waste of space Xie Er who had come at him just now, he would likely have been struck dead before he could even get close. But Fu Shen had lasted a dozen moves against him without being defeated. For someone his age, this was very rare.

And Fu Shen was inwardly apprehensive now. He had sensed that Yan Xiaohan really hadn't been holding back in his first blow. He had been ready to kill the Count of Qingyi's son, just like that. The Feilong Guard were arrogant and despotic, known for running wild among the court and the commons—only now was he learning that these words were no joke.

If he couldn't seize a victory with a surprise attack, Xie Er might well die here today.

At this critical moment, Fu Shen's brain moved more clearly and swiftly than ever. Thoughts flashed through his mind like sparks. He snatched them up swiftly and chose a strategy—

Two swords clashed, rattle-clang, the sound like heavy rain, swift as a hurricane, the shining bodies of the swords practically becoming two pieces of white silk. Fu Shen's wrist strength was insufficient. In the end, he lost the upper hand bit by bit. When the two of them crossed swords once again, Yan Xiaohan easily sent the sword flying out of his hand, and the force of his blow had yet to be spent. The point of the sword pressed toward Fu Shen's throat, carried on a fierce wind, about to stab through him.

But that wouldn't do.

Yan Xiaohan could kill Xie Er without hesitation, but before he killed Fu Shen, he would have to think it over.

The blade hummed. It was forced to turn aside in midair. The sword's wielder had perfect control over this weapon. His wrist turned, and the flat of the sword missed Fu Shen's neck by just a sliver, brushing dangerously past his carotid artery.

At the same instant, Fu Shen suddenly struck!

He had been waiting for precisely this moment. Fu Shen had expected that Yan Xiaohan wouldn't deal him a killing blow. When his blade had turned aside, Fu Shen leapt toward him, practically pressed against the flat of the blade. He was instantly at close quarters. A small and nimble hunting knife silently pressed against the knot of Yan Xiaohan's throat.

It was just a flash, rapid as a falcon diving after a running hare; in the blink of an eye, the situation had reversed.

"Lord Yan, I'm sorry." Fu Shen panted into his ear and pressed, "I don't want to put you in a difficult situation. Tell your people to let go of Xie Er, withdraw, and immediately leave the mountain."

He had excellent control over his strength; he could keep Yan Xiaohan from speaking without suffocating him. It was obvious at once whom he had learned this move from. Yan Xiaohan had a remarkable ability to adapt. Being controlled, he calmly made a gesture at once, indicating for his subordinates to put down their weapons.

"Drop your sword, too."

Yan Xiaohan loosened his grip. Fu Shen kicked the sword away.

Xie Qianfan was accustomed to being high-handed. Today, having finally run into trouble, he was shocked, ashen-faced. He had just thought he was going to die. Now that the Feilong Guards had let him go, he retreated with his tail between his legs, trembling fearfully, behind Yi Siming. Suddenly, he heard Fu Shen say, "Xie Er."

"Huh?"

Fu Shen said, "You first spoke provocatively, then fired an arrow meant to injure. Come over here and apologize to Lord Yan."

The young aristocrats and the Feilong Guards on the scene were all startled.

Xie Qianfan at last recovered from the enormous shock. He was so angry he squeezed both hands into fists and flushed red. He roared fiercely, "I won't! What the hell is he supposed to be! The court's dog! Why should I apologize to him?!"

Yi Siming quickly held back Xie Qianfan and said placatingly, "Fu Shen..."

"Will you apologize?" Fu Shen's expression was grim. He coldly said, "If you keep throwing your tantrum, I'll let him go right now, and you can have a try."

Xie Er gaped.

Yan Xiaohan, whom he had by the neck and was also using to scare Xie Er, barely held out. He nearly laughed aloud.

Xie Qianfan glared fiercely at him, the rims of his eyes turning redder and redder. Finally, he burst into tears and started wailing. "I won't, I won't, I won't! You're all on his side! Do I mean nothing to you?!"

There was silence.

Yan Xiaohan heard Fu Shen sigh softly behind him.

"He's a child, he's been spoiled rotten. He really wasn't deliberately trying to offend you," Fu Shen said quietly. "So allow me to apologize in his stead. Holding you under duress was a matter of necessity. I'm sorry."

Truly a softhearted person.

There was still some childishness peeking through his voice, but his tone and skills were as steady as an adult's. Once his breathing had evened out, it was very soft, making a person feel a restless itch at heart when it brushed past the ear.

Yan Xiaohan thought quietly, *You're also still a child—*

Before the thought could finish passing through his mind, a number of dark forms suddenly burst out of the depths of the forest. While no one was paying attention, they ran among the team of Feilong Guards and instantly threw themselves at someone!

"What are those?!"

The alarmed cry split off Fu Shen's attention. Taking advantage of his momentary distraction, Yan Xiaohan struck like lightning. He grabbed Fu Shen's wrist, pulled and twisted; with a teeth-aching crunch, he had dislocated Fu Shen's shoulder.

Fu Shen's reaction was also extremely quick. He turned around and kicked him away, meanwhile using the force of the kick to roll aside and reset his shoulder. He broke out in cold sweat from the pain. But he had no attention to spare to come after Yan Xiaohan for revenge, because the bumbling uninvited guests had turned into a threat not to be lightly overlooked. It wasn't only the Feilong Guards; several of his crowd had also been knocked down.

Even Yi Siming was starting to swear. "You fucking... Where the fuck did these things come from?! Fu Shen! Didn't you say there were no wild boars on this mountain?!"

Fu Shen roared, "I haven't been here for years, how could I know?! Into the trees, into the trees now!"

There had been a period when wild boars had run rampant on Mount Baoyan, ruining the farmland and crops at the foot of the mountain. The local peasant households had really had no alternative. They'd had to go to the capital to request of the owner to act. So Fu Shen's father, Second Uncle, and Third Uncle had taken a team of the Beiyan Army to stay at the Youlan Manor for half a month. They had raided a dozen wild boar dens, wiping them out. Since then, Mount Baoyan had been free from invasion and harassment by wild boars.

In recent years wild boars had appeared once again, but there had only been a few, and the peasant households hadn't thought anything of it. No one had expected there to be so many wild boars hiding in the forest. And they hated humans bitterly, biting as soon as they saw one, chasing a crowd of well-trained Feilong Guards and defenseless young aristocrats into a state of pants-wetting terror.

At Fu Shen's bellow, his group all climbed the trees one after another, but without Yan Xiaohan's order, the Feilong Guards hefted their swords and grappled with the wild boars. Fu Shen squatted in a tree, resting for a breath and looking down. He couldn't bear it; he was just about to call out to Yan Xiaohan, tell him not to die keeping face. When the words had come to his lips, he caught a glimpse of Yan Xiaohan beneath the tree he was hiding in, besieged from the front by two wild boars while the thicket behind him shook slightly.

Fu Shen's pupils contracted sharply. He leapt, falling at the same time as the wild boar that had launched itself from the thicket. He yelled, "Look out!"

Yan Xiaohan was knocked over by him falling out of the tree. The two of them, holding each other, rolled a good distance over the ground. The clothing over Yan Xiaohan's back had been torn by the boar's sharp tusks, a scratch sliced into his back. Fresh blood flowed all over Fu Shen's hands. If not for Fu Shen, he would have taken a direct hit and by now would have had two holes clear through him.

"Thank you..."

Fu Shen only heard him say this. Then he felt a strong pressure on his shoulders, and he flew aside involuntarily. Yan Xiaohan had thrown him off!

Before he could work anything out in his astonishment, a dark form charged up from behind him like a cyclone. But because of his movement just now, Yan Xiaohan had no opportunity to dodge. Fu Shen watched helplessly as the thick tusk entered his abdomen—

"Just run already!"

Yan Xiaohan's shout exploded in his ears, but he himself had no time to stand. He was headbutted by a wild boar and dragged along the ground. Very fortunately, the belt used in the Feilong Guard uniforms was a wide leather belt with a copper buckle in the form of a beast's head. The beast's head caught the wild boar's tusk, narrowly taking the force of that crushing blow for him.

The wild boar, as if in a frenzy, dragged Yan Xiaohan, striking wildly over and over. Fu Shen froze in place for a moment, then broke into a run and followed. When he had come close, he nearly lost his mind. He almost coughed up a mouthful of blood.

He roared up at the heavens, "What the fuck! Didn't you check your horoscope before going out today?!"

In the depths of the forest, there had suddenly appeared a craggy precipice strewn with rubble.

That wild boar had most likely developed intelligence. It had failed to stab Yan Xiaohan to death after repeated attempts, so it wanted to throw this hateful human to his death.

Yan Xiaohan had also seen the cliff behind him. In a moment of desperation, he grabbed the wild boar's tusk, intent on pulling it from the copper belt buckle by force. But in the end, there was no time. In a blink, the wild boar had reached the edge of the cliff. It swung its head, giving him a hard toss.

The mountain wind whistled. Hanging in midair, the man's bodyweight at last forced the wild boar's tusk and the copper buckle apart. Yan Xiaohan's body dropped rapidly. He knew in his heart that this time he was done for.

His vision went dark. The momentum of his fall abruptly stopped.

Fu Shen was hanging half off the cliff, gripping his clothes with one hand. All his veins were visible on the surface. Gritting his teeth, he said, "Grab my hand..."

Yan Xiaohan's face, which always seemed to be hidden by a mask, at last displayed genuine astonishment.

"You..." The movement of his lips was hardly perceptible. His quiet voice was caught by the mountain wind, almost inaudible.

The next moment, his eyes suddenly widened. "Behind you! It's still there!"

Sharp pain came from Fu Shen's back. His body fell uncontrollably forward. Despite this, his hand was still firmly clutching Yan Xiaohan's clothes.

"Fu Shen!"

He and Yan Xiaohan fell off the precipice together.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

WATER GURGLED, CONSTANT AND UNINTERRUPTED. THIS PLACE was wet and cold. Everything hurt. Fu Shen woke to the world spinning. Before he could get a clear look at his surroundings, he vomited.

Someone came over and held his shoulders, brought a leaf filled with water to his lips. "Rinse your mouth."

Darkness passed in front of his eyes again and again, and he was seeing double. His limbs felt as though they had just been taken apart. Movement was difficult. Only when his head had been held down, forcing him to drink some mouthfuls of water, did he slowly take a breath and recognize his fellow sufferer.

"Lord Yan," Fu Shen said feebly, "is there a clash in our horoscopes...?"

Contrary to expectations, Yan Xiaohan didn't talk back. He only stared at him. There were water droplets on that beautiful face. The grim savagery had been washed away. The expression on it was actually a little lost.

With his amber-like eyes fixed on him, Fu Shen's spine prickled. He quickly extended a hand and waved it in front of his eyes. "What's wrong? Have you been possessed?"

Yan Xiaohan gently held down his hand. "I'm sorry. I dragged you into this..."

Fu Shen was so startled by his abrupt sincerity that he nearly jumped to his feet. He waved his hand wildly. "No no no! Don't don't don't! I'm fine! Don't blame yourself!"

"Don't flail." Yan Xiaohan helplessly held down his other hand. "There's a wound on your back, take care."

Fu Shen, looking at this demon who killed without batting an eye suddenly turned into a gentle white rabbit, suspected that Yan Xiaohan was the one who had hit his head.

After being pushed off the cliff by the wild boar, the two of them had thought they were dead for sure, but it turned out that heaven won't abandon people. There had been a deep pool at the base of the cliff. Fu Shen had hit the water headfirst. The pressure of the water had knocked him unconscious. Yan Xiaohan had been more fortunate than him; he had bumped into the side of the pool and seemed to have broken a rib, but at least he hadn't fainted. Hauling Fu Shen, he had swum out of the pool and found a dry cave nearby, temporarily settling him there.

While Fu Shen had been unconscious, Yan Xiaohan had gone out to pick up a bushel of firewood and used the oilpaper-wrapped fire starter to light a bonfire. He figured that the two of them might not be able to leave this ravine tonight. He had meant to prepare extra firewood, but sadly the heavens hadn't cooperated. In hardly any time, the weather outside had taken a turn for the worse; rain had come pitter-pattering down.

Fu Shen touched his back and felt that the wild boar had torn a wound down to the bone. It had already been simply treated, wrapped in strips of fabric. He had two dry outer robes draped over him; his inner robe was drying next to the fire. Yan Xiaohan, meanwhile, was only wearing a soaked inner robe with a segment of its hem missing. A big bloodstain was spread over his lower back.

"Aren't you cold?" Fu Shen propped himself up on his arms and sat up, intending to pull off Yan Xiaohan's outer robe, but he was stopped by Yan Xiaohan's glance.

"You wear it. There's not enough firewood, it'll be very cold overnight."

Yan Xiaohan paused, then added, "I only have a slight flesh wound, it's no trouble. Don't worry."

Fu Shen didn't know that he had broken a bone. Seeing no other signs of injury on him, he believed him and leaned back against the stone wall. "I might not be able to walk now. I'll have to stay the night here. If you have the strength, when the rain stops, you can leave, follow the valley, and get out by morning."

Yan Xiaohan stirred up the fire with a twig, not even looking up. "I'm going to bring you out of here. Don't be scared."

Fu Shen laughed in spite of himself. "I'm not scared. Mount Baoyan belongs to the Fu family, what do I have to be scared of? Tomorrow someone is sure to come down and rescue me, and if I go with you, I'll only be a burden. You'll get away faster on your own."

"You're not a burden." Yan Xiaohan shook his head and changed his wording. "I want to stay with you, all right?"

"Huh?" Fu Shen startled, then awkwardly said, "Oh, that's… that's all right…"

Yan Xiaohan didn't say anything else.

Fu Shen had been born in the year of the uncouth monkey; even injured, he couldn't be idle. His curiosity was strong. He tried for ages to hold himself back but couldn't. At last, he carefully asked, "Well, listen, Lord Yan, what are you up to?… Er, why do you insist on staying?"

Yan Xiaohan thought he had asked a pointless question. He gave him a strange look.

"I-I-I mean," said Fu Shen, inwardly berating himself with *What are you stuttering for?* while continuing to stutter, red in the face, "I thought that you… weren't especially fond of me?"

Yan Xiaohan stopped what he was doing, turned toward him, and, looking at Fu Shen, said, "There's no need to call me 'lord.'"

"Hm?"

"My nominal age is two years older than you. I haven't had a courtesy name chosen for me yet. If you don't object, you can address me as an older brother instead."

Fu Shen was stupefied. "You haven't reached the age for the capping ceremony yet? You're only eighteen? You got into the Feilong Guard at eighteen?"

It wasn't that he was getting worked up over a trifle. Yan Xiaohan really was excessively mature and sedate, with nothing of a teenager's impetuosity and unripeness, and his position was quite high; no one would have guessed that he was only eighteen.

His startled expression was very interesting. When his eyes opened wide, they looked unusually childish. Yan Xiaohan lowered his head to hide the smile on his lips. "I have indeed not yet reached the age for the capping ceremony. As for the Feilong Guard, don't I have a good adopted father?"

Fu Shen realized he had been a little abrupt and awkwardly said, "Don't overthink it, Yan-xiong, I didn't mean it like that. With your skills, I don't suppose you would be inferior to anyone either among the imperial guards or the Feilong Guard."

"And I don't dislike you." Yan Xiaohan added a piece of firewood to the fire and casually said, "You saved me twice. I'm not going to leave you here."

Fu Shen almost rudely blurted out "Are all you Feilong Guards this good at repaying kindness?," and just barely stopped himself. With reserve, he said, "Thank you."

Yan Xiaohan said, "I'm the one who ought to be thanking you."

The rain fell harder and harder. Thick fog spread through the mountains. From time to time, a cold wind blew into the cave. Fu Shen had lost too much blood. His body temperature was low. He was so chilled his lips were ashen. Yan Xiaohan could see it even if he said nothing; he moved him over beside the fire and sat on the periphery himself, shielding him from the wind.

Fu Shen felt very gratified. He was the first among the younger generation of the Fu family. He had been taught since he was little by teachers that older brothers were meant to be companionable and younger brothers respectful, and he was on an equal footing with his friends. He had never truly experienced the sensation of having an older brother's care before. But in his current difficulties, Yan Xiaohan, a stranger, had just happened to fill that position perfectly.

Get past the rumor and prejudice, and he was steady, calm, considerate; his manner toward Fu Shen was precisely like a tolerant and mature older brother.

He was neither "black-hearted" the way Fu Shen imagined a court lackey to be, nor fawning and base as rumor in the street said a person happy to accept a eunuch as adopted father was.

Fu Tingxin had always taught him to judge a person by their insides and outsides, not to trust rumor at any cost. Fu Shen snuck a glance at Yan Xiaohan's downcast, frowning profile and wondered, between the imperial guard who drew his sword at a single disagreement and the young man shielding him from the wind and rain, which was his true "inside?"

"Yan-xiong," Fu Shen said, "take off your wet clothes. I'll give you an outer robe."

Yan Xiaohan said, "No need."

"Then come sit closer."

Looking at him, Yan Xiaohan wanted to pat him on the head. "I'm not cold."

"Can you stop saying things that are obviously only meant to humor a child?" When Fu Shen spoke, it tugged at the wound on his back. Though it hurt like hell, he still had to hold back and not grimace in pain. "What if you catch a cold? How am I supposed to take care of you in my state? We'd both meet our ends here."

He could talk himself blue in the face; the man at the mouth of the cave was steadfast.

Fu Shen said feebly, "Are you going to sit there until I come drag you?"

Yan Xiaohan's figure seemed to be sunk entirely in the shadows of the cave. The firelight and warmth were very far from him. He was silent for a long time, then finally said, "Fu Shen, you know what my background is."

Fu Shen said, "Huh?"

"You and I are worlds apart," Yan Xiaohan said. "Don't force yourself. There's no need to be particular about decency with me."

Fu Shen mentally repeated these words several times before finally working out what they meant; it turned out he was still worried about Fu Shen despising him. Not knowing whether to laugh or cry, he immediately roared, "I already said I don't look down on you, don't treat me like I'm on a level with that scoundrel Xie Er! If I despised you, would I still be calling you 'Yan-xiong' all the time? We're the only two people left in this wilderness, who's worried about being particular? Don't I have anything better to do?!"

He fell backward and drew in a hissing breath. "I've had enough, you're really something else… Are you actually two years older than me, or are you only two years old, Yan-xiong?"

Yan Xiaohan looked at him; there was exasperation in his expression, and also visible emotion.

Fu Shen couldn't know the feeling of being criticized behind one's back, and he didn't know that his tolerance and magnanimity made him alien in the eyes of the majority of people. Yan Xiaohan had thought that Fu Shen rescuing him again and again was already the utmost limit, not expecting that the boy's heart was wider than he had guessed.

"My wound hurts," Fu Shen suddenly said. "The rocks are hard. They keep poking me."

This unreasonable request that was nearly a deliberately childish fit of temper left his mouth and seemed to become infinitely legitimate the instant it reached Yan Xiaohan's ears. He finally compromised. He walked over from the mouth of the cave, sat next to Fu Shen, and patiently asked, "What do you want?"

Fu Shen immediately turned and fell into his lap. Indistinctly, he said, "To take advantage. I don't despise you, anyway, and if you despise me, you'll just have to put up with it."

"Rascal." Yan Xiaohan laughed in spite of himself and stretched his legs, giving him a more comfortable position to lie down in.

Eyes closed, Fu Shen commanded, "Put on one of the robes. You can use it to cover me, too, so I won't catch cold."

Yan Xiaohan agreed, took the inner robe drying by the fire, and covered him up, while he himself took off the wet robe and put an outer robe onto his bare upper body.

"I don't know when the rain will stop," he said quietly. "Stay alert at night. If you notice anything wrong, run at once."

Fu Shen responded with a big yawn.

Seeing that he was sleepy, Yan Xiaohan didn't speak again. The two of them, one sitting and one lying down, closed their eyes and rested, quietly waiting for daybreak.

Halfway through the night, the fire went out. The rain had yet to cease. Fu Shen's wound had been soaked in water and inevitably became inflamed. He ran a low fever during the night, so chilled his teeth chattered. Yan Xiaohan saw that the situation was going badly and, not caring whether he was overstepping, holding Fu Shen's head, helped him sit up and ordered him to turn toward him. "Come, sit in my lap… curl in your legs."

Fu Shen was muddle headed, doing whatever he was told, incredibly pliant. Yan Xiaohan put on his half-dried inner robe and made Fu Shen curl up in his arms, wrapped him firmly in the two outer robes, and used his own body heat to warm him.

Yan Xiaohan held his waist with one hand and his shoulders with the other, keeping him from falling. Fu Shen put his arms around his waist and pillowed his cheek against the hollow of his shoulder, finding himself a comfortable position, then finally settled down.

"Still cold?"

"No. But I'm hungry."

"..."

"I haven't had anything to eat or drink. I'm cold and hungry. It's all your fault we ended up here."

"Yes, my fault."

"You were sent to catch a criminal. Now I guess it's all right, you haven't caught the criminal, and you got pushed off a cliff by a wild boar... Will you be punished when you get back?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I have an adopted father. No one would dare to punish me."

"You're you, and your adopted father is your adopted father. Why do you keep mentioning him?" Fu Shen whispered. "What about your birth father?"

Yan Xiaohan suddenly fell silent.

After a long time, he at last said quietly, "I don't have a father."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THAT NIGHT IN THE WILDERNESS, CONSIDERED CLOSELY, WAS IN fact very dangerous. The two of them were injured, and outside was torrential rain. There was no lack of poisonous insects and wild beasts in the mountains, and there was always a risk of cave-in or avalanche. But every time Fu Shen remembered that night, his most deeply carved memory was of light, reassuring pressure on his back, easing him into sleep.

Such that when many years later he had once again fallen into that embrace, he had still thought it very familiar.

Early the next morning, the rain had stopped. Birds were twittering among the mountains. Fu Shen and Yan Xiaohan left the cave and followed the narrow valley out. After the rain, the air was pure and wet. Many mushrooms had grown in the forest. Fu Shen hadn't eaten all night and glanced toward the forest longingly. It was as if the words "I want to eat those" were about to drop out of his eyes.

Yan Xiaohan was forced to lead him by the hand back to the proper path. Coaxing, he said, "They're poisonous, you can't eat them."

"Straw mushrooms and the mushrooms under pines aren't poisonous, they're all edible." Fu Shen persisted. "I've picked white mushrooms on the plains. Trust me."

Yan Xiaohan was nearly moved by his certainty, but when he thought of their current predicament, he still unfeelingly refused. "Getting out of danger is the priority. If you want to eat mushrooms, I'll send you a box of them when we get back to the capital, and you can eat as much as you like, all right?"

Fu Shen lowered his head and mulled it over. He also thought that he had been making trouble over nothing just now. Normally he was very good at putting on an act of a sophisticated and sedate grown-up, but perhaps being tenderly and considerately cared for by Yan Xiaohan for a night had made the scant mischief in his nature rise up eagerly to the surface.

"But I'm hungry." He looked pathetically at Yan Xiaohan and said with emphasis, "Too hungry to walk."

In fact, the allure of the mushrooms wasn't so great, and Fu Shen didn't absolutely have to eat this meal. It was just that he was reluctant to give up last night's warm embrace and complete indulgence. With only the two of them between heaven and earth, he was trying to gain more of his fellow traveler's attention, thereby diluting his hunger, weariness, and the fear and anxiety brought on by the unknown.

To put it plainly, he was deliberately acting like a spoiled child.

Yan Xiaohan dropped his eyes and looked at him. Contrary to expectations, he didn't get impatient, and he didn't expose him. The look in his eyes was very soft, like a handful of melted snow, cold and limpid, with warmth reviving inside it.

He turned nimbly and went down on one knee with his back to Fu Shen. "Get up. I'll carry you."

Fooling around had to have its limits, too. Fu Shen wouldn't take advantage of a person's weakness like this. He retreated repeatedly. "No no no, Yan-xiong, I couldn't, I was joking!"

"I'm not." Yan Xiaohan turned his head. There was a smile hovering around his lips, as if he could pardon all his pointless troublemaking. "Let's say I'm compensating you for a meal of mushrooms. It's all right, come on."

Fu Shen's face showed hesitation. That not particularly broad but exceptionally upright back seemed to have an unusual force of attraction, luring him into taking a step forward. Mystically, he extended his arms and put them around Yan Xiaohan's neck.

Yan Xiaohan steadily lifted him onto his back.

A dull ache came from his ribs. The stress applied to his wound by the weight of a grown person couldn't be underestimated, but Yan Xiaohan wasn't in the mood to care about that. All his attention was focused on his feet and on the person on his back. At the outset, Fu Shen was as rigid as a coffin plank, doing his best to preserve a distance between chest and back. After a while, his body slowly softened as he pressed cautiously against Yan Xiaohan.

To use a rather unsuitable comparison, it was like a small animal, fur bristling, shyly approaching, then all at once flopping into his hand.

Shortly, there was a weight on his shoulder; Fu Shen had put his chin there.

Yan Xiaohan was compelled to relive that restless itch at heart that he had felt when Fu Shen had forced him into submission. He heard him say into his ear, "Yan-xiong, I really did help you out twice, but it doesn't count as any particular favor. It was the slightest effort. You… don't need to yield to me excessively to repay me."

Yan Xiaohan gently lifted him higher on his back and carelessly said, "I want to make you happy. How can that be called yielding?"

"Then what is it called?" said Fu Shen.

Yan Xiaohan thought about it earnestly, then said uncertainly, "Profound fatherly love?"

Fu Shen didn't know how to respond.

He knocked against the back of Yan Xiaohan's head with his forehead. His interlaced arms could feel the faint shaking of the chest beneath them. There was a smile in Yan Xiaohan's voice. "Not dizzy, are you? Careful, don't knock yourself silly."

Of course he was being good to Fu Shen in order to repay him, but it wasn't only to repay him.

Relationships between people were so delicate and unfathomable. It was easy to become an acquaintance, but it took affinity to become friends. Fu Shen seemed simply to have grown up in answer to Yan Xiaohan's wishes, and there were occasional happy surprises.

Last night in the cave, when the two of them had been nestled against each other for warmth and Yan Xiaohan had said "I have no father," those had in fact been thoughtlessly spoken words. Exhaustion and cold had temporarily weakened his reason, and his defenses had slackened slightly. Some very deeply hidden emotions had spilled out of the crack.

It was that his willpower was insufficient. But Yan Xiaohan wasn't planning on unburdening himself of his secrets to anyone, and he didn't need the comfort and sympathy of false civilities.

Fu Shen's mode of thought was very mature, his words and gestures all restrained and courteous. Yan Xiaohan had already anticipated what he was going to say and was just pondering how to avoid this subject when Fu Shen had said indifferently, "All right then. I don't have a mother, either."

His attitude was always like this—if you want to talk about it, I'll listen; if you don't want to talk about it, I won't ask.

Open and unstinting.

Yan Xiaohan breathed a sigh of relief. It was at that moment that had really taken this "little friend" for his "friend."

The two of them trekked through the valley for almost the whole day, going a long way. Fu Shen let Yan Xiaohan carry him for a while, then jumped off and walked on his own. The scenery in the valley was lovely, the babbling of flowing water, the abundant greenery, as well as a slope covered with wild orchids. If one ignored their current desperate predicament, this moment, this scene, was enough to deserve the name of pleasing to the eye and mind.

The two of them rested here temporarily. Fu Shen wanted to pick an orchid to play with, but he was once again stopped by Yan Xiaohan. He didn't get angry, only asked, all smiles, "Can't pluck this, can't pick that—what reason do you have to stop me this time? Are the orchids also poisonous?"

Yan Xiaohan gave him a wild fruit he hadn't eaten himself and sat down, slightly holding his ribs. He sighed. "No. It's just that I think these orchids have been doing very well growing in the valley, and if they hadn't encountered us, they could have lived safely and soundly through several winters and summers. If you pick one now, it will wither tomorrow. Is there any need?"

Fu Shen, laughing, said, "The ancients said, 'Not plucking but wearing its fragrance, what harm can it do the orchid?' Why, when it comes to you, does it turn into 'Pluck it or wear it, it all harms the orchid'?"

Yan Xiaohan considered, then answered, "'Plants have their own purposes, and ask not to be picked by a beauty.'"[1]

Fu Shen fell laughing on top of him. The two of them were very close, half their bodies pressed together. Yan Xiaohan thought to himself that this young master was remarkably pure. The two of them had gone through one series of tribulations, and now he was on such intimate terms with him just like that.

Though it could also be that, with only the two of them in the mountains, he was ultimately somewhat scared, and that was why he kept drawing nearer to him.

Yan Xiaohan reached out and put his arms around him. The two of them fell back and lay shoulder to shoulder on the grassy slope.

Fu Shen looked up at the cerulean sky, as clean as though it had been washed, and suddenly said, seriously, "Yan-xiong, when you cherish flowers, such that even a wild orchid can win your pity, why do you insist on brewing storms out of nothing?"

Yan Xiaohan said, "You're being silly again. Thunder, lightning, rain, and dew, they all come from the sky. 'Everything has its time, everything is fated, there is naught that I can do.'"[2]

Fu Shen sat up straight. "Then I'll go pluck that flower after all. Since time immemorial, all men who are born must die. Drink today while drink you may..."

Yan Xiaohan, not knowing whether to laugh or cry, pulled him back and hugged him tightly. "Get back here! Did... did you absolutely have to wade into that morass? Whether the Jin family lives or dies, what is it to do with you?"

Fu Shen said, "You guessed it all?"

"Was there any need to guess?" Yan Xiaohan said, scoffing softly. "A crowd of people blocking the road without cause, each and every one of them with 'guilty conscience' written all over his face. It's just that I couldn't afford to offend all of you, or else I would have snatched you up and brought you back to the Feilong Guard's interrogation office. No need to come to blows, a single scare would get a confession."

Fu Shen laughed dryly. "Hahaha..."

Yan Xiaohan said, "Before I came, I heard that many important people in court were pleading on Jin Yunfeng's behalf, including General Fu. That's why you protected those two, isn't it?"

Before Fu Shen could raise his head, he heard him continue, "Take a piece of advice from me, don't take everything onto yourself or let loyalty go to your head to the exclusion of everything else. The Duke of Ying Manor stands exposed to the strongest winds. Do you really think His Majesty doesn't know about General Fu and His Highness Prince Su?"

Fu Shen said, "So is my Second Uncle..."

"He can submit a memorial to the throne asking for clemency, because he is halfway to a student of Jin Yunfeng's. We must honor heaven, our nation, our forebears, and our teachers—his action is not wholly blameworthy. Moreover, it doesn't require true feeling. It's enough to go through the motions. But it's different for you." Yan Xiaohan squeezed the back of his neck. "You don't have a speck of connection to Jin Yunfeng. You're the son of the Duke of Ying's first wife. If you shelter the remnants of the Jin family, you'll drag the whole Duke of Ying Manor into it, understand?"

Silence, like the sunset glow, descended slowly over the grassy slope.

Yan Xiaohan lowered his eyes and looked at Fu Shen's thoughtful face. He felt that perhaps he had spoken too strongly, but then he thought better of that; if this made him see the severity clearly, then being a little harsh didn't signify.

In fact, he shouldn't have breathed a word about it. The lives and deaths of others, whether they had been unjustly accused or had deserved it, had nothing to do with him. The Feilong Guard was a sword in the emperor's hand. A sword had no need to "judge" who ought to die.

But Fu Shen was different, after all—

"Yan-xiong," Fu Shen suddenly said, "you're saying this for my own good, I get that."

Yan Xiaohan didn't feel consoled in the least, because it was very obvious that he was going to follow up with a "but."

"But there's one thing you said wrong," Fu Shen said. "My Second Uncle is submitting a memorial to the throne because he genuinely wants to ask for clemency for Jin Yunfeng; he isn't doing it for anyone else's benefit. If Jin Yunfeng were really guilty, he wouldn't have rushed back all the way from the border passes, and His Highness Prince Su wouldn't have asked this of him while hiding off to the side lazing around himself.

"Jin Yunfeng has been unjustly accused. That being the case, when those two came to me, I couldn't stick my hands in my sleeves and do nothing."

Yan Xiaohan was simply about to die of anger because of him.

"In affairs of the court, who dares to call himself blameless and innocent? He was in private contact with Han Yuantong, passing information to Prince An Manor. Several letters, as well as money and possessions, were discovered in his home. His words were irreverent, quite censorious concerning the matter of retaking Prince An's vassal state… His Majesty personally declared him guilty. How has he been unjustly accused?!"

Fu Shen sighed. "I heard that it was the Feilong Guard that was in charge of investigating this case. Shouldn't you know even better than I do whether this 'evidence' is authentic or fabricated?"

He was certainly bold enough, lying in a person's arms while insinuating that he was "acting as an accomplice to villainy," and "taking the side of evil." Yan Xiaohan could have throttled him with a simple movement, but Fu Shen didn't seem to care at all. Clutching his collar, he continued, "Yan-xiong, I don't want to lie to you. That's why I'm telling you this. I really don't know very much about court business, but I know that vassal princes are one of His Majesty's greatest fears."

"If you know that, why did you still…"

"But I also know that my Second Uncle wouldn't have rushed to ask for clemency on behalf of a treasonous minister." Fu Shen's gaze fell on the tall and slender, gently swaying orchids. "'The noble orchid is as a man of noble character, and the common orchid is as a common official. Where there are ten common orchids in the mountain forest, there may be one noble orchid.'[3]

"Of all the civil and military officials at court, the only one who dared to step forward and speak on Prince An's behalf was Jin Yunfeng."

Yan Xiaohan said coldly, "All that talk, and you're just willfully refusing to see sense."

Fu Shen said, "It isn't that I'm refusing to see. It's that someone is determined to take the wrong path."

Yan Xiaohan said, "Watch what you say."

"What is there that can't be said? What is there that I don't dare to say?!" Fu Shen looked fixedly at him. "Fabricated crimes, a miscarriage of justice, seizing property and exterminating a whole family on false charges. His Majesty is wrong! Wrong is wrong!"

Yan Xiaohan immediately rolled over and covered his mouth, so angry his chest was heaving and his breath coming urgently. The two of them, one on top and one on the bottom, locked eyes, smelled each other's breath, could each see himself reflected in the other's pupils.

"Keep the words you've said today hidden in your belly. If I hear them again, there will be no need for anyone else to step in, I'll take you to the imperial prison myself. Remember that."

Fu Shen frowned, said two muffled syllables into his palm, and hit him with his knee.

Yan Xiaohan let go.

Fu Shen's shriek soared up to the clouds. "Get off! You're pressing on the wound on my back… Ow!"

Yan Xiaohan realized there was nothing he could do about Fu Shen: you might say he was smart, but he was always headstrong at unsuitable times; you might say he was mature, but sometimes he could be ridiculously childish.

This temper was too thorny to handle.

But though he was so heretical, Yan Xiaohan only hoped he could conceal it. He wouldn't demand that he change, and he didn't want to harm him.

After this reflection, he suddenly found he could forgive Fu Shen's feelings in insisting on extending a helping hand to the child of the Jin family.

With no one to help him up, Fu Shen slowly picked himself up off the grassy slope. The hot blood rushing to his head had passed, and he calmed down and realized that he had been somewhat excessively impertinent in front of Yan Xiaohan.

In essence, he wasn't a person who went to extremes. It was just that the "way" he followed was different from that of others, and he was young and naïve, so he always had some of the pride and arrogance of a person who didn't know the hardships of human life, and he hadn't yet learned how to conceal his edge.

Yan Xiaohan was the first to stand. Without so much as looking back, he said, "Let's go."

Before he could take the first step, there was a tightness on his wrist. He looked down and found that Fu Shen had grabbed hold of his sleeve but didn't dare to look up at him. He had his head down, looking rather pitiful.

Oh, I see, Yan Xiaohan thought, *he's finally woken up from his lunacy.*

He narrowed his eyes, inwardly laughing to himself, but outwardly appearing completely unmoved. Flatly, he asked, "What is it?"

Fu Shen said, "I… spoke inappropriately just now and made you angry. I'm sorry."

Yan Xiaohan didn't speak. He wore a cold expression.

Fu Shen earnestly said, "I admit it, I was wrong. If you want to hit me, scold me, punish me, you are at liberty to do as you please."

"That's enough," Yan Xiaohan said coolly. "How brave do you think I am that I would dare to beat or scold Young Master Fu? You weren't wrong. The wrong one is me, the scheming sycophant."

Fu Shen's head hung even lower. He was truly regretful, and this was truly his first time humbling himself to apologize. Who would have thought that the recipient wouldn't be having any of it?

"I never took you for a scheming sycophant, it's just…"

Just what?

Just that those who walk different roads cannot make plans together. Just that I firmly believe Jin Yunfeng was unjustly accused. Just that "A gentleman who practices virtue and upholds ethics will not abandon his principles when he finds himself in difficulty."[4]

He couldn't say it. He let go of Yan Xiaohan's sleeve and dejectedly repeated, "I'm sorry."

His falling hand was suddenly caught by a dry and slightly cool palm.

Yan Xiaohan squatted in front of him. "Who just said he could accept, beating, scolding, and punishment, put me at liberty to do as I pleased? You made me angry, but you can't take a few words of criticism from me. Young Master Fu, is this apology of yours so insincere?"

Fu Shen inexplicably felt the roots of his ears heat up. All kinds of feelings mixed in his heart. He dared even less to raise his head to look at him.

Yan Xiaohan, considering it himself, thought he was quite evil. Here was a wealthy and pampered young master who had been injured and fallen off a cliff; today he'd had a taste of all the misery he hadn't experienced in his life to date. And finally he had been bullied into this state by Yan Xiaohan; it was too mean of him.

Fu Shen didn't know what to say. He could only keep saying, "I'm sorry."

Yan Xiaohan clicked his tongue and asked, "Are you being sincere?"

With his free hand, he lifted Fu Shen's chin and made him look directly at him. "Lift your head. You're not even using a form of address. Who are you apologizing to? What you said before doesn't count, do it again. What should you call me?"

All he had meant was to make Fu Shen call him "Yan-xiong" and apologize, and then he would have left him alone. Instead, Fu Shen misunderstood him. After a long silence, in a timid attempt, his voice very soft, he said, "... gege?"

Yan Xiaohan stumbled. This address of "gege" from him instantly made his heart crumble. The hand loosely holding Fu Shen unconsciously drew back.

A cool breeze blew past, spreading the fragrance of orchids everywhere.

"You... I..."

Unexpectedly, Yan Xiaohan was also stammering. He bent down and picked Fu Shen up off the ground, dusted leaves and mud off him, and, feeling more than he could explain in a few words, said, "Let's go."

Fu Shen hadn't caught up yet. "Is it... all right?"

"It's all right, my eldest young master." Yan Xiaohan looked down at him and, in the depths of his heart, sighed soundlessly. His lip curled slightly, and he turned to say right into his ear, "If you call me that again, I'll even forsake the darkness for the light for your sake."

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1. Han Yu, Tang Dynasty poet, "Orchid Melody"
2. Zhang Jiuling, Tang Dynasty poet, the first in a series of poems commonly called "Orchid and Orange"
3. Huang Tingjian, Song Dynasty calligrapher, painter and poet, "Written at the Youfang Pavilion"
4. From "The School Sayings of Confucius"

CHAPTER TWENTY

WHEN NIGHT FELL, THE TWO OF THEM AT LAST WALKED OUT OF the valley and met the Feilong Guards coming in search of them. Yan Xiaohan boosted Fu Shen onto his own horse and rode with him. The Feilong Guard personally escorted him back to Youlan Manor.

When they reached the manor's gate, all the guards halted, and Yan Xiaohan dismounted here as well, handing him over to Yi Siming and the others who had rushed out, then added a few words enjoining him to look after his wound, remember to change the dressings in a timely manner, and other such things. Then he spurred his horse to leave.

His form was immersed in the vast night and the dim lantern light, its outlines unusually profound, his face seeming on this account exceptionally haggard. Fu Shen was desperately remorseful; he felt very apologetic. Reasonably speaking, when a person had gone through all manner of difficulties to bring him back, he ought to invite him in to rest and have some tea. But the fact that he was sheltering the Jin family's child was already well known to both of them. If he were to let the Feilong Guards in, it would be no different from putting a sheep in a lion's mouth. Everything that had come before would be in vain.

"No need to see me off. Rest well." Yan Xiaohan, holding the reins, seemed to understand his remorse. With a gentle smile, he said, "I still have an assignment to fulfill, so I won't trouble you any further. Look after yourself, Young Master Fu. We'll see each other in the capital."

Fu Shen raised his hands to bid him farewell. He watched the forms of the Feilong Guards disappear at the end of the mountain road. When he turned, he found Yi Siming with his arms folded, watching him thoughtfully. He flatly added a sarcastic remark: "Tsk-tsk-tsk, you've just met each other, and already you can hardly stand to let him leave, have to watch him go until your eyes tire? Look at the pitiful state of you. You'd love to have him tie you to his belt and take you along. Impressive."

Fu Shen shot back, "At least he rescued me from the ravine. What were you doing? By the time your honored self had finished drinking tea and resting up and gone to find me, my corpse might already have been cold. You still have the face to 'tsk'? Delightful."

Yi Siming said, "... That's great, of course you wouldn't stint at giving up your life to save him. You won't even let me speak ill of him. Fine, let's go, let's go, the doctor has been waiting inside for ages, go get your wound looked at."

After this experience, no one was in the mood to hunt anymore. They stayed the night at the manor, then arranged to return to the capital. The woman and the infant, meanwhile, were taken away and made arrangements for by Yi Siming. Fu Shen stayed another two days, until the wound on his back had closed up and scabbed over, then rode unsteadily down the mountain himself.

Before leaving, he deliberately circled back to that slope covered in wild orchids to have a look. After long hesitation, in the end he couldn't bring himself to pluck a flower. He sighed into the wind, turned, and urged his horse to depart.

When he recalled that scene once more many years later, it was as distant as something in another lifetime. He finally understood the true meaning of a young man not understanding sadness but forcing himself to speak of sadness in order to write poetry.

The next day he returned to the Duke of Ying Manor and was given a good talking to by Fu Tingxin. Relying on his youth, Fu Shen didn't take the wound on his back seriously. After lying in bed for two days, he got up and was once again ready to leap and frisk.

It was just that the situation in the capital wasn't very good now. The impact of the rebellion case spread wider and wider. It wasn't only Han Yuantong's party that was investigated; Prince An's family was involved, and even Jin Yunfeng's students and old friends were dragged in. His Majesty seemed determined to make Jin Yunfeng serve as a warning to Prince An. Fu Tingxin and others' memorials to the throne sank like stones into the sea. The court was in a panic, everyone feeling himself in danger.

Though Fu Shen did not attend court, he could still learn some things from Fu Tingxin. He was sad and worried. The sadness was because he to this day didn't dare to tell his Second Uncle the news about the Jin family's child, lest the decision he had taken into his own hands make trouble for Fu Tingxin. The worry was because those two were in a critical situation. Until this case was resolved, they couldn't be free.

While he was lost in thought, a servant suddenly brought him a calling card and said that it had been handed in outside, inviting him to attend a banquet the Jinghe Building on the west of the Chunming Bridge.

Fu Shen took the card and looked at it. The red label on the envelope had his name written on it. The note on the gold-flecked writing paper inside was written in correct small regular script; the signature was "Left Shenwu Corps Captain Yan."

He leapt up, hastily went into an inner room to change his clothes and comb his hair, and prepared to go out. Though he was deliberately keeping his face impassive, he still couldn't hide his desire to jump for joy. The servant trotted after him the whole way, thinking to himself in bewilderment, *How strange. Who could possibly steal his soul away with a single note?*

The Jinghe Building was a well-known restaurant in the capital. The cook made good Yangzhou cuisine. Fu Shen quickly walked up the stairs, pushed open the door of a private room, went around a four-paneled screen, looked around, then caught sight of the figure dressed in light greenish blue sitting upright. That person, hearing footsteps, just happened to turn his head toward the door.

"Yan-xiong!"

He was smiling before he even spoke. Perhaps even he himself hadn't noticed it. Yan Xiaohan saw and rose to greet him, his manner mild and genial as a spring breeze stroking the face. "Come inside, please. Are you feeling better, Young Master Fu?"

"I've been better for ages. It was only a scratch, nothing important." Fu Shen sat across from him and drank a bountiful of the tea Yan Xiaohan had personally poured for him. "What puts you in such good spirits today, Yan-xiong? Has there been some happy event?"

Yan Xiaohan laughed in spite of himself. "No. It's just that when I heard you had returned to the capital, I ought to have prepared a gift and paid you a visit to thank you for saving my life, but my position is an embarrassing one. It's already extremely difficult to make friends with you. I couldn't go sully the Ducal Manor's gates as well. I thought about it from every angle and decided to invite you out to thank you in private."

There was a colossal difference between their positions. They were doomed to be unable to be on friendly terms publicly. By mentioning it over and over, Yan Xiaohan probably wanted to make him keep a low profile to avoid attracting censure. Fu Shen did appreciate this kindness. Sighing, he said, "You're being too much of a stranger, Yan-xiong. You and I have even stayed in a cave in the mountains together, why keep discussing position and family status? Or do you mean that in your eyes, I'm a snob who despises the poor and curries favor with the rich?"

Yan Xiaohan knew perfectly well that Fu Shen was deliberately demeaning himself, but he still couldn't resist backing off. Giving in, he said, "Fine, we won't mention it. I misspoke. Do not be offended, Young Master Fu."

Substituting tea for wine, he gave himself a penalty of one cup. As he spoke, a waiter knocked on the door and laid dishes all over the table. The rarity of the ingredients didn't match up to those at a wealthy and noble family's manor, but the skill in preparation won out. The food was delicate and nourishing, and there was nothing strong-smelling like fish, shrimp, or mutton. Even Fu Shen's cup contained pleasantly sweet fruit juice.

This feast clearly showed Yan Xiaohan's attentiveness. Fu Shen naturally was unwilling to run counter to his kindness. The two of them ate and chatted, their talk roaming wide. The meal lasted nearly two hours.

Past noon, when they had eaten and drunk their fill and it was time to stand and leave the table, Yan Xiaohan suddenly said in a low voice, "Matters have been tense at court lately. The Jin case has spread very wide. His Majesty often asks about it, ordering the officials to investigate strictly again and again—" He pointed at Fu Shen. "You people digging up the foundations behind his back must be careful."

Fu Shen's expression froze. He said guiltily, "Thank you for the hint, Yan-xiong."

"Spare me the thanks," Yan Xiaohan said with a snort. "If all of you can hide your tracks properly, I'll be eternally grateful."

The two of them couldn't very well leave at the same time, so Yan Xiaohan went on ahead. Fu Shen waited in the private room for half the time it takes to drink a cup of tea. When he came downstairs, a big carriage hung with green sailcloth suddenly arrived at the door and stopped right in front of him. The driver nimbly jumped from the carriage and bowed to him. "Hello, Young Master Fu, my master commanded me to take you back to your manor. There are also some presents prepared for you in the carriage. Please get in."

Fu Shen said, "Hm? And your residence is…?"

The driver simply and comprehensively said, "The North Guard's Yan Manor."

Considerate and proper. Indeed, this seemed to be Yan Xiaohan's style. Fu Shen pushed aside the carriage curtain and nimbly got in. He saw that inside the carriage were two boxes neatly arranged, one big and one small. The big one was square, the small one was flat and long. In spite of himself, he said curiously, "What's in the boxes?"

The driver said apologetically, "I don't know, my master purchased it all himself. We're about to set off. Take your seat, young master."

Fu Shen sat in the carriage, which didn't jolt at all, and carefully opened the long box on top. When he had had a clear look at what was inside the case, his heart began to beat wildly.

It was a finely made bow of red sandalwood!

That day on Mount Baoyan, Yan Xiaohan had broken Fu Shen's bow with his sword. Afterward the two of them had fallen off the cliff and had a long trek, gone through thick and thin, and he had forgotten about this; he hadn't been planning on demanding compensation from him. Who would have expected Yan Xiaohan to remember it and find an opportunity to make it up to him?

Fu Shen's heart felt both sad and soft; his throat seemed to be blocked. He reached out and lightly stroked the surface of the sandalwood bow, polished enough to see his reflection in, and felt a few characters of seal script carved into the end of the bow. It was this bow's name.

"Setting Sun over a Pool."

He calmed himself slightly, replaced the lid of the box, then went to look at the other box, the big one. This time when he opened the lid, he didn't want to cry anymore; he wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry—the box turned out to be full of dried mushrooms, as well as pine nuts, hazelnuts, chestnuts, and all kinds of other dried foods.

He really did remember everything; he remembered favors, and he remembered foolishness.

Fu Shen stared at that box for a while, smiling stupidly. The carriage reached the side gate of the Ducal Manor and stopped. Seeing him get out of the carriage, the pages outside the gate hurriedly came forward to carry the things. Fu Shen held the case with the bow himself with infinite care. As he walked, he instructed, "Bring this to my courtyard. A little later, sort out half of it and bring some to all the rooms. Say that a friend sent it."

Let him be a Feilong Guard or an imperial guard, Fu Shen had acknowledged this friend, anyway. As for the Ducal Manor's gates, well, let them be sullied.

The next day, Fu Shen woke early and went out to see Yi Siming. He kept thinking about what Yan Xiaohan had said yesterday and had to confirm with his own eyes the safety and security of the slave girl and the baby before he could rest assured.

Yi Siming was meticulous in action, and he had wide connections, so he had been the one to take those two and make arrangements for them at the outset. Because there were government troops posted at checkpoints on all the waterways, it would be hard to send them south, and going to another province would also be unsafe. Yi Siming had simply settled the two of them in a little single-family house in a town in the countryside to be cared for by an old couple. Outwardly it was explained that this was their grandniece from another part of the country, whose parents were both dead, who had come seeking shelter with their grandnephew.

Fu Shen and Yi Siming galloped. When they reached that house, the slave girl Caiyue was helping the old woman with her embroidery work. Seeing her benefactors arrive, she quickly stood to attend on them, bringing tea and pouring it with unusual solicitousness. Fu Shen looked around, saw that she would be comfortable living here and that there was someone to tend to the infant, and relaxed slightly. He reservedly instructed her not to go out much in the coming days.

Though he was afraid that the girl would take fright and didn't explain the situation at court clearly, Caiyue was aware that there was no escape for her master, and that it would be unlikely that he would be exonerated in the future. Tearfully, she bowed to them and, weeping, said, "I am indebted to you two gentlemen for saving my life. I will not forget my gratitude as long as I live. I am unable to pay your great kindness in this life and can only be a vegetarian and recite the names of Buddha, pray for your good fortune. In the next life I will willingly be your beast of burden, readily gallop on your behalf."

Fu Shen turned aside, rejecting this gratitude, and Yi Siming said with a sigh, "There's no need for this. You only need to bring this child up well, and our efforts won't be wasted."

The growing infant could already crawl around on the kang bed-stove. He somehow ended up sent to Fu Shen and, opening his toothless little mouth, gnawed on his sleeve. Fu Shen picked him up. Seeing him flail his arms and legs and babble adorably, the haze in his heart faded slightly. He couldn't resist a small smile.

He was young and well favored, splendid as orchids and jade trees to begin with. This smile was like a thousand trees blossoming. It brightened the whole room. The baby also seemed to be delighted, wriggling around in his arms, trying to cling to him. Fu Shen hadn't thought that he would be so likable to small children. He loosened his hold and let the child play around.

After the big one and the little one had fooled around for a while, the old woman came and carried the baby away. Yi Siming was unwilling to stay here long. He took this as an opportunity to bid farewell. Fu Shen left them some silver and clearly stated that there was no need to see them off. Then the two of them, attracting as little notice as possible, went out to return to the city as discreetly as they had come.

But midway, Fu Shen casually felt at his waist and found that the jade pendant he had been wearing was gone. If he had dropped something else, it would have been all right, but as luck would have it, his Second Uncle had given him that pendant. It hadn't left Fu Shen since he was little. Upon seeing this, Yi Siming said, "Maybe it got pulled off while you were playing with the child just now. I'll go back with you to look for it."

Fu Shen waved a hand gloomily and said, "I won't trouble you, Yi-xiong, keep going. I'll go back the way we came and look, then come back when I've found it."

Yi Siming knew that this object had a considerable significance for him. He wouldn't rest until he found it. Therefore, he didn't insist. He urged on his horse and departed. Fu Shen meanwhile turned his horse's head around and went back in the direction of the town.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

PERHAPS IT WAS SOME OBSCURE DIVINE WILL THAT MADE THAT jade pendant fall in the little house in the county town. Capricious fate was like an enormous hand, with an effortless gesture stirring up the elements, overturning heaven and earth; with an effortless gesture, severing the youthful friendship that came to the end of the road before it had time to warm.

Fu Shen to this day was unwilling to think back on the precise circumstances of that day. In his life, he had encountered many bumps in the road, great matters of life and death, each one more serious than this, bloodier than this; neither was he a weak person unwilling to face something he knew was painful. But perhaps the first injury always hurts exceedingly. This matter itself was an anomaly, because it and the series of events that had followed closely after it had tragically proclaimed the end of his youth.

Backtracking to the county town required merely an hour. But as soon as Fu Shen entered the town, he sensed an unprecedented delicate atmosphere. The number of people in town seemed to have decreased. Those walking in the streets were few, the doors and windows of the houses were shut tight. The closer he came to the house Caiyue was living in, the more it seemed unusually quiet.

At the same time that Fu Shen, leading his horse, walked into the alley, the gate of the small house was by coincidence pushed open from inside.

The two people who ought not to have appeared here and now ran into each other without warning.

He stood dazed where he was, as if he had been hit in the face with a club. Even his eyes became unfocused. His lips opened and closed, but only voiceless speech came out—

"Yan—Xiao—han."

As if he had fallen into a cave of ice, Fu Shen even had to clench his teeth and squeeze his fists in order to keep himself from shaking. Subconsciously, he had already understood everything the moment he had seen that person, but his brain seemed to be lagging behind. It was in chaos, bewildered. He could only call Yan Xiaohan's name; he couldn't say anything else.

What are you doing here?

What have you come for?

Why did you... lie to me?

Yan Xiaohan had likely also been caught unawares by him, but he was more composed than Fu Shen. The astonished expression only flashed over his face. Then it was pressed back into his deep pupils.

He even pushed the door open wider. Dozens of Feilong Guards filed out. Amid the grim and cold glint of weapons, Yan Xiaohan naturally and amiably said, "Why have you come back?"

Fu Shen said, "I dropped a jade pendant and only noticed on the way, so I came back to find it."

Yan Xiaohan struck his palm in apparent vexation. Shaking his head, he said, "No wonder. It ought to have been flawless."

Clenching his teeth, Fu Shen said, "Yesterday you deliberately warned me that the court was strictly investigating escaped criminals and sent people to follow me today, so you could find this place, and when I left, catch them all in one net. That way, you would have caught the criminals without anyone being the wiser. And I would have been in the dark. No matter what, I wouldn't have suspected you.

"A fine feint, a fine show of standing by until opportunity comes along, waiting for your enemy to tire! With Lord Yan's schemes, a mere position of captain of the imperial guard is truly unworthy of your talents."

Yan Xiaohan seemed not to hear the irony in his voice. Cupping his hands, he said, "In order to capture the criminals, I resorted to this unwise move. I had no alternative. Do not blame me, Young Master Fu."

Fu Shen laughed. "I don't blame you.

"I'm to blame, for meddling in other people's business, for leading the wolf inside." He stared at Yan Xiaohan, his gaze as sharp as a knife. Slowly, he said, "I was blind at the outset, or I wouldn't have taken a wolf for a sheep. Now that the wolf has bitten me, it's just what I deserve."

Yan Xiaohan stood with his hands behind his back. No emotion showed on his face. Dully, he said, "I am sorry."

Fu Shen didn't spare his sensibilities. He refused apathetically. "Save it. I can't accept it."

The two of them stood at an impasse for a long time. Finally, Yan Xiaohan took one hand from behind his back and spread his hand open, revealing the smooth and glossy piece of sheep-fat white jade inside with an openwork round carving of two morning calm flowers. The knot that passed through the top of that jade pendant had loosened, and its colors had dulled with age. It was clear at a glance that someone had carried this for a long time.

"Is it this one?" he asked.

Fu Shen didn't say a word. Pinching the tassel, he raised the pendant. When Yan Xiaohan's palm was empty, he curled his fingers as if unaccustomed to the sensation, and only then drew back his hand.

At this point, neither of them had anything to say to the other. A broken mirror couldn't be put back together, spilled water couldn't be unspilled. Betrayal and deception were laid out on the stage in their most direct attitudes. Guilt, apology, even the assurance of having justice on one's side—with the facts already settled into place, manner could change nothing.

With Fu Shen's temper in the past, cursing, scolding, or shaking his fist wouldn't have been surprising, but now he only felt weary. He wanted to find a place to close his eyes and sleep. Yan Xiaohan had stuck the knife in too accurately and too fiercely. It had firmly nailed him in place. Before the blood could spill, he had already lost the strength to resist.

Perhaps Yan Xiaohan wasn't entirely to blame. Fu Shen himself, completely unguarded, had practically pointed at his own chest and told him where to stab. Wasn't that stupid?

"Fu Shen." When he had taken a step, ready to leave, Yan Xiaohan suddenly called to him from behind.

He said, "I told you before, your position and mine, one in the heavens and one under the earth, are worlds apart."

Fu Shen stopped.

"Breaking your heart was my mistake. But if I had to do today's events over again, I would still choose to do this."

The iron-hearted Feilong Guard had at last torn off his immovable mask, for the first time in his life exposing his ambitions and desires beneath the bright light of day. With the assurance of justice on his side, he unexpectedly seemed more open than the man of integrity.

"Even in the mud heap there are differing degrees of depth. Though my feet are sunk deep into the mire, I am still trying to fight my way out of the mud."

A few crisp claps came from ahead of him. Fu Shen at last turned around. His long brows were raised high, a smile on his lips, the scorn and ridicule in his eyes covering all he saw.

"Truly moving. What a pity I never thought any such thing." Softly he said, "Lord Yan, do you still not see it? No one has forced you. You are the one who sank in of your own volition and insist on rolling in the mud."

After saying this, he turned to walk out of the alley.

Fu Shen wanted to put an end to it and just walk away, but with each step he took, the knife stuck in his heart seemed to be pulled out by a sliver. The blood and pain lost their barrier. They could no longer contain what gushed from the wound.

This alley was so long it seemed to have no end. He knew there was someone behind him watching him go, so he did his best to straighten his back. But the stiffer it was, the more it seemed that there was nowhere for that pain to hide.

In a daze, a figure seemed to emerge before his eyes. The back wasn't very broad, but it was unusually upright as the figure half crouched in front of him, telling him to climb on.

Fu Shen suddenly became angry. He turned abruptly and hurled that morning calm flower jade pendant at the ground.

There was a crash, fragments spraying everywhere.

"From now on, you and I are like this piece of jade."

He wouldn't take another look, as though casting everything behind him. Yan Xiaohan stared at the fragments covering the ground. He seemed to have seen the reddened rims of Fu Shen's eyes when he had turned his head.

Considered as a friendship, there didn't seem to be any great difference between their relationship and that of ordinary friends. To say that this rupture was a loss of all love would be going too far; one might say that it was a repudiation of brotherhood, but it hadn't altogether been caused by incompatible ideologies. He knew faintly in his heart that he seemed to have lost something frailer and more profound than friendship.

Shattered all over the ground like that piece of jade was perhaps full and unreserved trust, and a still youthful and confused sincerity.

Fu Shen galloped out of town, like an arrow leaving the string, throwing clouds of dust up to the sky. Fortunately there were few people in the town, and outside the town was a large stretch of wasteland. He didn't strike anyone in his mad dash. The wild winds in the wilderness were like ocean waves that covered the earth, fluttering his robes, blurring his eyes, and letting him give vent to his rage in his self-tormenting charge.

When he finally stopped, worn out, Fu Shen touched the corners of his eyes and found that they were dry.

He didn't know whether he hadn't cried, or whether the tears had been blown dry by the wind.

Now, his feelings went to his head, and he thought he ought to pick up a sword and charge back to the town to slaughter Yan Xiaohan; now, he was downcast and dejected, only wanting to find a secluded place to down a thousand cups, lament that he had fed his heart to a dog. But these thoughts skimmed over his mind, coming and going in an instant. When he stopped at last, Fu Shen didn't want to do anything anymore.

How could different paths have the same end? In the beginning he hadn't been scared of the forces of evil, and in the end he had become one of the hundreds of thousands who had been taught a lesson.

Once you knew you had been wrong, when it came time to put something aside, it had to be put aside.

The wind was mighty, the open country was vast. Fu Shen said to himself, "Isn't he just an ingrate? I've been bitten, but does that mean I can't survive?"

That was what he said, but when he returned to the manor and saw the carefully stored case with the bow in his bedroom, Fu Shen's nose still stung unavoidably. He bore this indescribable sadness and called a page in. "Put this case away in the storehouse."

The page asked, "In the general storehouse, or the one in the young master's courtyard?"

Fu Shen had meant to say the further the better, but when the words came to his lips, he was worried that the bow would be taken and ruined by someone else. A breath caught in his throat, going neither up nor down. At last, he acknowledged it with irritation. "Put it… forget it, you can put it in my courtyard."

He considered, then added, "Put it away properly. Don't put it near water, and don't let the moths and worms get at it."

Fortunately they hadn't known each other long, and they weren't so closely linked. This was the only thing that had to do with Yan Xiaohan. After the bow case was taken away, Fu Shen finally felt less dreadfully oppressed. He fell down facing up and lay flat on the bed.

Major ups and downs, major griefs and joys were the most taxing to vigor. Somehow, Fu Shen groggily went to sleep. In his dream, he once again returned to the Mount Baoyan precipice. This time there was no wild boar, only the accursed Yan Xiaohan dangling from the cliff one-handed with a bottomless abyss beneath his feet.

The Yan Xiaohan in the dream was as cold as ice, unwilling to call for help no matter what. Fu Shen was frantic and angry, but he had some qualms. He didn't reach out to pull him up.

"Why did you lie to me?"

The question he hadn't asked in real life was at last asked in the dream. Fu Shen paced back and forth at the edge of the cliff, panting. Suddenly falling apart, he roared, "You're lying to me! You lied to me before, and you're lying to me now! Jump! Just jump if you've got the balls!"

After shouting this, he gave a sudden start and woke up.

It was already dark outside. Without realizing it, he had slept all afternoon. Fu Tingxin was standing beside his bed, his expression a little weary. Seeing him wake, he asked with deep concern, "Why did you go to sleep without getting undressed? Were you having a nightmare just now?"

Fu Shen looked down at himself and found his hands pressed firmly to his chest. No wonder he had felt that he couldn't catch his breath in his dream.

He rolled over and got up, flexed his stiff and sore shoulders and neck, and suddenly noticed that Fu Tingxin was dressed in mourning garb, with a tidy look. His heart sank out of nowhere. He asked, “Second Uncle, are you going out?”

“I just received word from the palace,” Fu Tingxin said slowly. “Mr. Jin was unable to bear the torture inflicted on him. He cut his wrists with a piece of broken pottery in prison and left behind four words as a final testament… then died of blood loss.”

The will of heaven was like a knife. It seemed to feel that the previous knife hadn’t been stuck in deep enough, hadn’t hurt enough.

Fu Shen instantly became solemn.

“What… did he write?”

Fu Tingxin closed his eyes in exhaustion. He could no longer contain the sobs in his throat. Hot tears came rolling down—

“He wrote, ‘My conscience is clear.’”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

TOTAL SLAUGHTER—THAT WAS THE DEEPEST IMPRESSION LEFT behind by the major case, implicating a vassal prince, a military officer, and a civilian minister, that shook the court and the commons.

Han Yuantong was beheaded, Prince An's fiefdom was retaken, Jin Yunfeng committed suicide, and the whole Jin family, men and women, young and old, a dozen people in all, all perished.

Very few people knew that there had been two people who could have escaped death, but in the end had been unable to evade the nets of the Feilong Guard.

And it was even more unknown that these two people, who should have been dead without a doubt, were actually living in a small border town under assumed names, and seven years later, they would be able to meet their one-time savior.

The shock this gave Fu Shen was fully comparable to the imperial edict arranging his marriage a month ago.

After all these years, he had changed greatly. He had been honed by worldly affairs, been subject to the whims of fate; he was no longer the eldest young master acting out of hot blood. Being pushed far beyond his capacity into the experiences of war, he had rapidly abandoned his most useless childishness and willfulness, as well as his needless sensitivity.

His mind had settled, his edge had been restrained, and he had understood what "not being free to act" meant, and he had learned to respect that "everyone has their own ambition." He had even reestablished a friendship with Yan Xiaohan, written off the past at one stroke, never mentioning it again.

Fu Shen had furiously flung the jade pendant, loudly and resoundingly breaking off all ties with him. But later when his anger had faded he had thought it over again and had understood that actually he ought to have been content with his lot, because Yan Xiaohan had shown him plenty of respect that day. Arranging for the Feilong Guard to act only after he had left had at least in part been in order to conceal it from him, so that he wouldn't be grieved.

Leaving aside righteousness and moral principles for the moment, at the least he had done as well by Fu Shen as duty and humanity could ask of him.

Sadly, at the time, Fu Shen's anger had gone to his head. No matter what Yan Xiaohan did, it would be "scheming" in his eyes. The two of them had been estranged from that point on, until the winter of the eighteenth year of Yuantai, when a foreign ambassador had come to court and the palace had held a polo tournament. Emperor Yuantai ordered the imperial guards to take part and form a polo team with the young aristocrats to meet the foreign polo experts in battle.

Halfway through the match, the polo ball was hit out of the field. The young eunuch responsible for picking up balls was a little slow. Before the polo ball would leave his hands, a foreign player impatiently took a swing at it. The strength of a habitual polo player couldn't be compared to that of the average person. If this blow fell, even if the eunuch didn't die, he would be half-crippled. Fu Shen was closest. He dashed over, fished up the young eunuch, and flung him onto his own horse.

Polo was always rough. Collisions and injuries were very common. The foreigner was being intentionally provocative. He still didn't stop. His next swing was aimed at Fu Shen's face.

But before the mallet arrived in front of Fu Shen's eyes, from his peripheral vision he glimpsed something spinning as it came flying their way. It hit the foreign polo player's temple with a thump, with great force, knocking the six-foot-tall man right off his horse and into the ground.

Fu Shen looked around in astonishment and saw Yan Xiaohan seated on his horse, casually shaking out his wrist. He calmly apologized: "I'm sorry, my hand slipped."

That throw must have taken extreme force, and the burden on the wrist of pretending to have lost control of the throw on top of that couldn't have been called light. Fu Shen watched attentively. For the second half of the match, Yan Xiaohan indeed switched to using his left hand to hold the mallet. His right arm, holding the reins, was concealed by the wrist guard, but there was still a faint, uncontrollable tremor in it.

His emotions were complicated. Unavoidably, he recalled the past and consoled himself with the thought that now they had made a complete break. Favor had been returned for favor; they were even.

After the polo match ended, he stopped Yan Xiaohan off the field and gave him a bottle of top-quality ointment as an expression of thanks. But Yan Xiaohan didn't let him leave just like that. While he struggled to wrap up his swollen right hand, he said, "The barbarians were targeting us at every juncture, taking every opportunity to play dirty. By rescuing that young eunuch, weren't you putting yourself at risk?"

He actually had the gall to speak of "rescuing?"

Fu Shen pulled a long face at him and stiffly asked in response, "What else was I supposed to do? Watch him get beaten to death right in front of my eyes?"

"He's only a eunuch." Yan Xiaohan simply couldn't manage one-handed, so he let it go and laid his right hand on his knee. He calmly asked, "Was it worth you stepping in to save him?"

Fu Shen understood his implication, so he became even angrier. He yanked on one end of the bandage, applied ointment and wrapped in one smooth motion. He neatly and quickly wrapped his right hand up like a zongzi and tossed out a few ice-cold sentences before turning to leave.

"What's wrong with a eunuch? The ones who shouldn't be saved are those cruel and unscrupulous ingrates who repay kindness with enmity, stopping at nothing. They deserve to be left to their deaths."

The two of them were once again estranged.

The following year, there were great changes at the northern border. Fu Shen went through one bereavement after another. Before he had taken off his mourning clothes, he was turned into a living target by the gentlemen of the court, pushed onto the battlefield.

At the start of winter in the twentieth year of Yuantai, before Fu Shen left the capital, Yan Xiaohan once again voluntarily sent him a note, inviting him for a visit to a certain garden. There was heavy snow swirling through the capital that day. Pedestrians were scarce. Fu Shen actually accepted the invitation. Stepping over the withered grass and accumulated snow that covered the ground, he crossed a small bridge beside a lake and walked into a pavilion at the heart of the lake.

With glass windows on three sides and a door curtain on the last side to block the wind, the inside of the pavilion was warm and cozy. There was a white plum blossom branch stuck into a vase, a number of side dishes on the table, water burbling as it boiled on a portable stove. Yan Xiaohan stood in front of a window, looking at the snow. Hearing him enter, he turned around and smiled slightly.

Fu Shen was dressed all in white mourning attire, his expression cold. He had grown taller, but he was much thinner than before. It was as if he had shed his childishness to reveal the sharp and handsome lines of his future appearance.

"Why did you ask me to come?"

He was still pulling a long face, but his eyes were no longer full of mistrust. Of course, perhaps there was too much resentment on behalf of his country and his family weighing on him, and Fu Shen no longer had the strength to make a fuss about a matter so minor it couldn't even be called a trifle.

Yan Xiaohan said, "The army sets out tomorrow. For better or worse, you and I have known each other for some time. I have prepared some poor wine to give General Fu a send off. Would you do me the honor of sitting down?"

Fu Shen rudely raised his hems and sat at the table. "I may as well, since I'm already here. Don't punish yourself by standing up, either. Sit down."

Yan Xiaohan poured tea for him. Raising a cup, he said, "The road ahead is full of difficulties. I only hope you will take good care of yourself. I wish that in the coming year… I will be able to drink wine, take in the sights, and enjoy the snow with you again."

The road ahead was not merely full of difficulties. There were jackals, wolves, tigers, and panthers—it was simply certain death.

But he didn't try to talk him out of it. He wouldn't have succeeded, and he had no right to try. Three generations of the Fu family had been loyal soldiers. For Fu Shen, wasn't dying in battle one form of reaching a final resting place?

Fu Shen held his cup with one hand, touched it to Yan Xiaohan's cup lightly, and scoffed gently. "Don't flatter yourself. Who wants to look at snow with you next year? You'd be better off wishing instead that if I am unfortunate enough to die in battle, the last thing I do before dying will be to forgive you."

The wind sobbed over the lake. Snowflakes fluttered. The dome of heaven was like an enormous cave, never to be filled.

It was called a seeing off, but in reality it was like a final parting.

"I wish you swift success, that you may return in triumph." His hand did not shake. His smile was as usual. Quietly and calmly, he continued, "I hope you hate me for the rest of your life."

Through perils unnumbered, Fu Shen ultimately went forward against the current and won his survival. The wish spoken in the pavilion at the heart of the lake came true. By the time he returned to court, Yan Xiaohan had already been promoted to Imperial Investigator of the Feilong Guard. He was even more loathsome than before. The two of them worked together at court, arguing whenever they met, finally becoming known to all as a pair of mortal enemies.

The heavy events of the past had been lightly put aside.

But Fu Shen examined his conscience—had he really magnanimously put it aside?

He could be indifferent to the series of cause and effect; the wound had healed until it was as good as new; but could the feeling of being stabbed through by that knife be so easily forgotten?

After being bitten once by a snake, a person would fear the water-drawing ropes of a well for ten years. To this day, whatever Fu Shen did, he always had to prepare a backup plan; this was a habit leftover from that time. He was no longer afraid of being betrayed, but he still did not dare to put his full trust in anyone.

But what he hadn't expected was that beneath all those past events there was a final hidden truth.

Caiyue wasn't dead.

She was alive and well and standing in front of Fu Shen. She could still clearly recall her narrow escape from death. "… After Nian'er and I were captured by the Feilong Guard, we were locked up inside a prison, but we weren't tortured, and no one took us to be interrogated. About two days later, someone put a sedative in our food. When I woke up, I was in a carriage in the woods on Mount Baoyan. There was food, clothing, and money for travel expenses in the carriage. We relied on that money to stay in a nearby village and learn the craft of making wine. The year before last there was a disaster in the village. I heard that you were at the northern frontier, that traveling merchants passed back and forth there frequently, and it was safe and peaceful, so I took Nian'er north. I didn't expect that with Buddha's blessings, I really would be able to meet my benefactor..."

There was no need to guess who had engineered an escape for them like a cicada sloughing its skin. After capturing them, Yan Xiaohan perhaps hadn't even had time to submit a report before Jin Yunfeng had killed himself in prison. Once he was dead, the coffin could be closed and judgment pronounced. Caiyue and the child became immaterial; it made no difference whether they were dead or alive. Given the Feilong Guard's style of eradicating trouble entirely, most likely it would have all ended with a cup of poisoned wine. So he had taken the opportunity to swap the poisoned wine with a sedative, taken the two of them out of the city disguised as corpses, and let them escape.

As for why he had suddenly shown mercy, though it sounded like self-aggrandizement, Fu Shen could find no other way to explain it.

It was because of him.

Fu Shen truly did not know how to judge that simple-minded scoundrel Yan Xiaohan. It was as if someone had pounded on his heart, quick as beating a drum. It was stinging and painful. He wished he could fly over the border passes in one night and return to the capital to give him a vicious beating, make sure he never dared to get on his high horse again.

If he hadn't encountered Caiyue today, it was likely Yan Xiaohan would never have voluntarily told him about the truth of this. In front of Fu Shen, he always showed a benefit-seeking, self-serving, unscrupulous face, never explaining, never disputing, never asking for his understanding. His background was his original sin. Some people deserved from birth to struggle in the mud, now sinking, now emerging.

But with matters as they stood now, would he still dare to openly say that in his heart, there was nothing that stood higher than "benefit?"

A pot of strong liquor, so scorching that the pit of his stomach burned faintly.

"How hardhearted you must be, Yan-xiong," Fu Shen quietly said to himself, clutching the arms of his wheelchair. "Do you really have the heart to let me hate you for the rest of our lives?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

THE CAPITAL, AT NIGHTFALL AND THE LIGHTING OF THE LAMPS.

The whole desk was stacked all over with official documents. Yan Xiaohan had his head buried in them, hopelessly busy. The porridge and pastries on the tray had cooled long ago. The old butler hesitated at the door for a long time, then finally braced himself and quietly snuck in.

"Master, you've been reading all day. You ought to rest your eyes and have something to eat."

Yan Xiaohan was unmoved. When he had written the final few lines, he tossed aside his brush and rubbed his wrist. He leaned indolently back in his chair, his tall, slender body curving into an arc. He sighed lengthily. "Fine, I'm finally done with it."

Hardly had he spoken than he suddenly turned his head aside and sneezed. The butler said in a panic, "Hey now, what's this? You mustn't catch cold… Shall I have a bowl of ginger tea prepared for you?"

Yan Xiaohan wrinkled his nose, waved a hand, and said, "You're fretting over nothing. I'm fine."

The butler, smiling, said, "It's said that 'one's for thinking of you, two's for cursing you, three's for longing for you.' There must be someone thinking of you."

Right after he said this, Yan Xiaohan sneezed again.

The old servant said, "… I'll just go have them prepare that ginger tea."

Yan Xiaohan snorted. "Forget it, come back. Isn't this to be expected?"

At first the butler was confused about what was "expected" about it; shortly, he understood what this meant. He scrutinized Yan Xiaohan's expression and teased, "I suppose the Lord Marquis is in Yanzhou and missing you right now, sir."

He continued, "Forgive me for speaking out of turn, master, but this constant bustle of yours, working day and night, is truly too bad for your health. If the Lord Marquis were here, no doubt he wouldn't let you work this hard."

"Hm?" Yan Xiaohan raised his eyebrows and scoffed, "That sounds like… my wife hasn't even crossed the threshold yet, and you're already using him to pressure me?"

The butler saw that he didn't seem angry and hadn't sneered; instead, he appeared rather cheerful. So he boldly said, "You and the Lord Marquis will be living in conjugal harmony in the future, supporting each other throughout your lives. There will be someone thinking of your comfort, giving you every tender care—how can that be called pressuring?"

At his ingratiating words, Yan Xiaohan's face broke into a smile. When he was finished smiling, he said, "It's nearly the end of the year. I've seen people from the countryside come filing into the capital to bring New Year gifts. The Marquis of Jingning will be celebrating the New Year in the north this year. It's colder there. Pick out some thicker furs and silks and load them into a cart to send to him. Apart from that, how is it coming with the craftsmen I asked you to find?"

He'd left only a few days ago and likely hadn't yet eaten all the provisions he had brought from the capital, and here was Yan Xiaohan concerned with sending him new things. The butler thought to himself, never mind how very stately their master was ordinarily, when he truly came to love a person, there would still be all manner of tender feelings, attentiveness and consideration, and the inability to put aside or cast away.

While inwardly glorifying Yan Xiaohan, the butler answered, “Yes, sir. I’ve found all the craftsmen. Since it won’t require a great construction effort, two or three craftsmen should suffice. It’s just that for the pool you mentioned, a design will have to be drawn, and the stone purchased. They will only begin construction once you have approved the plans. It will be a little slow.”

“It’s all right if it’s slow, just as long as it’s finished by the twelfth of the second month,” Yan Xiaohan said. “Put some hard work into it. If anything needs to be purchased, just come get the money. If no one from the Duke of Ying Manor shows their face, you can consult with the people from the Ministry of Rites.”

Since Fu Shen had left, the things Yan Xiaohan had to handle had increased abruptly. In fact, before Fu Shen had come to stay, this was how he had always lived. It was just that when a patient who needed to be waited upon had arrived in the house, Yan Xiaohan, worried about not having enough time for him and unwilling to disturb Fu Shen’s convalescence with routine business, had pushed many things back again and again, up until now.

While Fu Shen had been living at Yan Manor, apart from when he was summoned to the palace, Yan Xiaohan practically hadn’t spent the night out of the house, hadn’t attended social gatherings; after getting off duty, he had immediately gone home to accompany him while he ate and took his medicine, to hold him up while he exercised his legs in the courtyard, to help him wash up and bathe; though the two of them had occupied separate rooms, he always went to Fu Shen’s bedroom to have a look at him before going to bed, leaving only when he had fallen asleep… In fact, some of these duties could have been handed over to servants. But Yan Xiaohan had seen with his own eyes how Fu Shen had been living at the Marquis of Jingning Manor. Since he had ended up in his hands, he wasn't going to let Fu Shen experience any unnecessary hardship.

He had watched this person disappear into the distance time and time again, knowing full well that he couldn't convince him to stay. Now that Fu Shen couldn't walk, could he try to convince him, tell him not to leave again?

Apart from official business, he had also been dealing with some private matters lately. One matter was sending Wei Xuzhou to investigate the cut-sleeve rumor, and another matter was the truth of the assassination attempt on Fu Shen. His Majesty had ordered the three judicial chief ministries to investigate the latter; after two months, the ministries had only just yesterday presented a memorial to the throne winding up the case. Yan Xiaohan had also read that memorial; it was all empty verbiage. For the simple reason of "falling short in their duty to protect," the Ministry of Justice and the Imperial Court of Judicial Review had arrested some officers of high and low rank among the local troops and turned up a handful of Tartar spies, interrogating them to extract confessions, then heaped all the blame onto the Eastern Tartars and called the case closed.

As for who had instigated the attack on the diplomatic mission, where the gunpowder that had caused the landslide had come from, whether the target of the assassination had been the Eastern Tartars' youngest prince or Fu Shen—all these questions remained shrouded behind a heavy fog.

The chief officials of the three judicial ministries had a tacit understanding among them. None of them were willing to make a fuss over this case. Probably they had already worked out His Majesty's reservations concerning Fu Shen from the arranged marriage. Only a Right Assistant Investigating Censor of the Court of the Censorate, named Gu Shanlü, persisted in believing that doubts remained about this case and kept asking for scrutiny. But his memorial to the throne was never even brought before the emperor's eyes; it had been stuck at the bottom of the stack of documents by his note-taking eunuch.

Yan Xiaohan couldn't openly employ the Feilong Guard to investigate, and doing it in secret took more effort, while the results were scant. Because this concerned the Beiyan Army's secrets, and Fu Shen had always taken strict precautions against the Feilong Guard, it was very hard for his people to learn any useful information. The only harvest after two months was that they had dug up a "wild channel" used for private exchange between Tongzhou's troops and the horse thieves at the border.

The "wild channels" corresponded to the "official channels;" as the name suggested, this indicated secret trade between government soldiers and common merchants. Merchants traveled everywhere; the troops could purchase provisions and medicines from them, as well as foreign firearms and swords. There had even been people acting as go-betweens for the Eastern Tartars and the Han forces, exchanging food, tea, salt, and other such goods for war horses.

In the past, the official channels had been on and off, and the taxes extremely high, so the wild channels had emerged to meet demand and continued despite repeated prohibition. Without exaggeration, every defense force at Great Zhou's border had at least one "wild channel."

Supposing that the gunpowder really had come through the "wild channel," given that the Qingsha Gap was situated at the extreme north of Tongzhou, the best opportunity to lay an ambush and the greatest suspicion belonged to the Tongzhou defense force.

According to Fu Shen, His Majesty's spy in the Beiyan Army was a high-ranking officer. The Tongzhou troops had been split off from the Beiyan Cavalry many years ago, and the Beiyan Cavalry's western line of defense and the area of Yuanzhou were closely connected to it.

Perhaps Fu Shen already knew the identity of that person. But Yan Xiaohan didn't need to know the details, since he couldn't stick his hand into the Beiyan Army's affairs.

But if Fu Shen couldn't get rid of that person, whether it was for Fu Shen's sake or his own, whether from public or private motives, Yan Xiaohan had to add another thrust of the knife.

As for the other matter, that had been completely outside of his expectations. The cut-sleeve rumors had actually come from Fu Shen's stepmother Madam Qin. Her daughter was the crown's First Consort in the Eastern Palace and had passed it on to him as pillow talk, and that was why the crown prince had been able to think up a cheap trick like the arranged marriage and bring it to Emperor Yuantai to "ease his burdens."

There was no need to investigate the rest; all one had to do was think. Madam Qin had gone to great pains to stab Fu Shen in the back simply because she wanted her own son to inherit the title. She was afraid of being thwarted by Fu Shen, so she had gotten ahead, trying to make sure that Fu Shen would "have no progeny."

A selfish and vicious woman had used a tactic from the inner courtyards, involving a shameful secret, yet had nearly set off a change in power over the military force of Beiyan, destabilized the court.

How ironic. How stupid.

But when Yan Xiaohan first heard this information, what he was angriest about wasn't her starting a rumor about Fu Shen being a cut-sleeve and causing the current crisis; instead, he remembered Fu Shen in the cave saying, "I don't have a mother, either."

It was one thing not to have a mother; tormented by an uncaring and vicious stepmother as well, how had he been living all these years?

Yan Xiaohan calmed himself briefly in the Feilong Guard's depot, then found a subordinate and instructed, "The Marquis of Jingning has a brother, named Fu Ya. I hear he's often to be found frittering his time away outside. At such a young age, he's already a man of unrestrained spirit. His Majesty has never liked the Duke of Ying Manor to make too much of a spectacle. Since the Marquis of Jingning is betrothed to me, I should give his brother what he is due."

The subordinate was wise in the ways of the world. It was clear to him at once. "I understand. Might I ask, Your Honor, would you prefer him to become unfit for anything at once, or have his health slowly undercut with drugs?"

"There's no rush," Yan Xiaohan said with a cold laugh. "Take it slow. It's best if there's a flare-up when they ask to have the title conferred on him. I would like to see who else in the Fu family will be able to undertake the title of Duke of Ying in the future."

Didn't Madam Qin like it when people had no progeny? Then let her darling son have a taste of it.

As for First Consort Fu, Yan Xiaohan had planned to sort her out along with Fu Ya. But news came from the crown prince's Eastern Palace that Fu Ting had attempted to frame the crown princess using voodoo, and had been exposed by a trusted maid, causing the plot to fall through. Owing to her being part of the Fu family, the crown princess had spared her life and only stripped her of her rank, giving her the punishment of cleaning the floors and doing odd jobs.

The crown prince was witless, but the crown princess Lady Cen was a clever person. Yan Xiaohan was only too glad to have someone spare him the trouble. Observing the recent trend of events at the Duke of Ying Manor, he thought not without pleasure, *I wonder what Madam Qin will think in the future when she sees the fates of her two children?*

* * *

In Yanzhou City.

Fu Shen had returned to the northern border in the name of giving offerings to the dead, but before he could resign his post as commander of the Beiyan Army, as soon as he entered the city, he was welcomed back to Yanzhou's provincial seat by his subordinates. Apart from the officers out on patrol, all the major and minor officers got together and rushed back to Yanzhou City to wish him a long life in conjugal bliss and the speedy birth of his first son, nearly angering the Marquis of Jingning into getting out of his wheelchair. This crowd of big monkeys clamored for half the day and at last were kicked out by General Fu, shamed into fury, who told Xiao Xun and his subordinates to drive them half a li away.

In the afternoon, the Beiyan Army's doctor Du Leng examined the wounds on his legs. After examining them, he smiled and said, "Congratulations—"

Fu Shen had already developed a reflexive reaction. Cold-faced, he said, "The same to you."

Du Leng was brought up short.

The two of them stared at each other in dismay. Du Leng gave an awkward cough. Holding back his laughter, he said, "I mean, congratulations, Lord Marquis, your wounds are healing well. The one who has been treating you must be a divine physician of great renown. The bones have largely knitted, the muscles have strength. Another half a year of recovery, and you'll be able to leave your wheelchair and walk like an ordinary person."

Fu Shen was silent for a moment.

Pretending to be casual, he asked, "To recover completely, how long would that take?"

"A full recovery is impossible," Du Leng said patiently. "Judging by the current state of your convalescence, if you follow my original plan, sixty to seventy percent is the limit."

Fu Shen muttered to himself and made no comment on this. He only said, "Thank you, Mr. Du."

Not long after Du Leng left, a young man opened the door and came in. This man was slightly older than Fu Shen, with a clear and handsome countenance and a mild and friendly expression—not Yan Xiaohan's sort of gentleness, which was like a mask, but the natural grace of a gentleman. When Fu Shen saw him, he released the angry breath he had taken. Pointing to a chair, he said, "You're here, Qingheng. Sit. You've been working hard."

The man's name was Yu Qiaoting, courtesy name Qingheng. He was a close friend of Fu Shen's, capable and efficient. While Fu Shen had been away, the Beiyan Army's affairs had been overseen by him, keeping them from getting into a total muddle.

Yu Qiaoting couldn't possibly be in the mood to sit. He wished he could reach out and grab Fu Shen by the collar. "What is the situation in the capital now? And what's going on with the arranged marriage?"

Fu Shen picked out some general information about the situation to tell him. After listening, Yu Qiaoting's expression remained ugly. He quietly said, "His Majesty really is... determined to boil the hound after it's caught the rabbit. What good does it do him to destroy his own defenses?"

"He is the sovereign of the nation. The things he sees are different from what you and I see," Fu Shen said. "Luckily, he only finds me offensive to the eye. If one day he should find the whole Beiyan Army offensive to the eye, then everything really would be over."

Yu Qiaoting shook his head and asked, "So what are you going to do?"

"Me?" Fu Shen said in confusion. "Get married. Can I resist the imperial edict?"

Yu Qiaoting said, "... I know you're going to get married, stop showing off. I mean, are you really planning to hand back the Beiyan Army to the court like this, let His Majesty do as he pleases?"

Seeing Fu Shen hold back on answering, he gave another hint: "His Majesty is getting on in years... Jingyuan, you have to think of the future."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

"IT'S A GOOD THING WE'RE THOROUGHLY ACQUAINTED, OR I'D have thrown you out by now, you know that?" Fu Shen said. "Should the mighty Expeditionary General of the North be talking about meddling in the imperial succession?"

Yu Qiaoting said, "With the knife already at our throats, what is there that can't be said? I've never known you to go in for such lofty and impractical notions. Are you submitting to fate, or do you have your own plans?"

Fu Shen, caught out by him, laughed. "What is your view?"

Yu Qiaoting said, "The crown prince has acted without virtue, Prince Jin is incompetent. The rest are all mediocre. There's only—"

"Prince Qi," Fu Shen snatched away his words. He said, "Publicly, His Highness Prince Qi has always had a name for being virtuous and able. Privately, my little sister is his first wife. So you think that he is suited to inheriting the empire, that he can be a good emperor in the future?"

Yu Qiaoting nodded.

Fu Shen said, "Qingheng, wake up. If Prince Qi ultimately does ascend the throne, I'll be a relation of the emperor on his wife's side. How many of those have come to good ends in history?

"Never mind that he's polite enough to me now, once he's sitting in that seat, I'm afraid it will be another matter," he continued. "You and I are leaders of the army and already have no end of worries. He would be the lord of hundreds of thousands. He'll only have more to think about than the two of us. Weren't my late father and His Majesty once known as a 'sovereign and minister on good terms'? And now that it's come to making trouble for his son, is he still following the old pattern just as mercilessly?"

Yu Qiaoting became more and more fretful as he spoke. His hair was about to turn white. "According to you, Prince Qi won't do either. Who else suitable is there among the direct line of descent?" He suddenly remembered something and gave a violent start. He said, "Jingyuan! You aren't thinking of having His Highness Prince Ying's..."

Fu Shen openly acknowledged, "I've thought about it."

Yu Qiaoting sighed in awe. "General, you truly are bold."

"But it's impossible," Fu Shen said. "His background alone is a major problem."

Yu Qiaoting said, "Then what..."

Fu Shen said, "I've often thought, whether it's His Majesty, the crown prince, Prince Qi, or anyone else sitting on that imperial throne, whether he is a capable ruler or an inept one, why, in the end, will the Beiyan Cavalry always become a fishbone he can't swallow? I won't conceal from you, I have even wavered. I thought that perhaps the problem wasn't with His Majesty, but that the mere existence of the Beiyan Cavalry itself was a mistake."

Yu Qiaoting sympathized with his feelings and sighed.

"But the Beiyan Cavalry has defended the northern border for so many years, worked assiduously protecting our homes and our nation. Where is the wrong in that?" Fu Shen said. "The Beiyan Cavalry is the keen sword of the nation. A sword can't be wrong. The wrong lies with the person wielding the sword. So long as the hilt is in another's hand, we will always be subject to suspicion."

Yu Qiaoting was stunned by General Fu's speech, which was even more treasonous than his own. "Jingyuan, are... are you planning to revolt..."

"What are you panicking about? I haven't done anything yet, have I?" Fu Shen laughed lightly. "Moreover, I'm getting married. Am I going to pass up a nice life, get worked up over some trifles and end up alone?"

Yu Qiaoting truly couldn't restrain himself. He said sarcastically, "General, knock it off already. You're a blind cat who's run across a dead rat. Don't brag as if you'd been bestowed a perfect marriage by heaven."

Fu Shen said nothing.

After talking a cartload of nonsense, the conclusion was that they couldn't revolt, couldn't force an abdication; the unresolvable was still unresolvable, and what was worrying would continue to worry them. Fu Shen in fact had a dim, hazy notion, but it was too universally shocking. If he spoke it aloud, Yu Qiaoting might well bring in Army Doctor Du to treat his brain. He considered it and ultimately shut his mouth in the nick of time.

New Year's Eve was on its way. The atmosphere in Yanzhou City was festive. Soldiers spent the whole year overworked; only at the New Year could they relax slightly. The city's residents had always been close with the Beiyan Cavalry; things were sent to Fu Shen's manor all day. When the servant from Yan Manor drove into the city and found the provincial seat, he was nearly drowned by the heap of chickens, ducks, and geese at the gate.

Fu Shen was in the courtyard, eating the cook's secret recipe meatballs, drinking and chatting with Yu Qiaoting, Xiao Xun, and others. Hearing that someone had come to bring presents from the capital, the wine he had just drunk shot straight to his head with a roar.

He forgot that he was still in a wheelchair. Leaned on the table, he automatically made to stand up and was held down by the sharp-eyed and deft-handed Xiao Xun. “General, I’ll push you out.”

Yu Qiaoting said doubtfully, “Why are you going out? Have him come in.”

The newcomer was a personal attendant who was often with Yan Xiaohan. He came forward and first asked after Fu Shen’s health and kowtowed to him, calling him Lord Marquis. He pronounced a great deal of well-wishes, then finally said, “Presents from our master of the house. The master specially instructed me to bring the Lord Marquis some of the new products to taste. Though the Lord Marquis is away from the capital, he can still sample the tastes of his hometown. This is the inventory of gifts, please look it over, Lord Marquis.”

The words “our master of the house” instantly ironed Fu Shen’s chest flat. Yu Qiaoting laughed and said derisively, “Just get a load of that talk. Already your nearest and dearest are distant and those with hardly any connection are close. The general says every day that Yanzhou is the place that birthed him, raised him. Well, now I suppose we’ve been shown. Hey, Jingyuan, where is your hometown, really?”

Fu Shen forced down the corners of his mouth and poked him away with a crutch. Impassive, he accepted the inventory of gifts, gave a tip to the personal attendant and ordered him to withdraw and rest, while he himself, encircled and watched by a crowd of busybody geese, opened the cases and reviewed what the hell Yan Xiaohan had sent him.

Yan Xiaohan was a firm and canny person. The relationship between the two of them couldn’t develop too fast. It had to be carried out properly on the surface. Therefore, these holiday gifts were scrupulously correct, all ordinary game and furs, with no extravagant gifts and no fault for anyone to find.

Fu Shen breathed a sigh of relief, though he was inexplicably a bit disappointed. He laughed at himself for being so idle he was making problems out of nothing. While his mind was wandering, he heard Yu Qiaoting give an exclamation. "Odd. Are there also wild geese among these holiday gifts?"

The first case of game contained a pair of frozen wild geese. Xiao Xun and Yu Qiaoting each picked one up. They looked at them and clicked their tongues. "We have plenty of deep mountains and old forests here. We can have any game we want. I was wondering why this crafty-minded Lord Yan had to choose to send game here. And after all that fuss, it was for the sake of these two wild geese! Isn't that right, Chongshan?"

Xiao Xun nodded forcefully beside him. "Right, for the sake of the wild geese."

Fu Shen, as if frozen, said, "What are you rattling on about? Don't act like you've never seen wild geese before. Impressive."

Yu Qiaoting was determined to rattle on. "Are these ordinary wild geese? These are the wild geese used for the six etiquettes, Lord Marquis!"

"Shut up, there's no need for you to say it. You think I don't know the six etiquettes include wild geese?" Feigning indifference, Fu Shen pulled his long-furred cloak higher, letting the fur hide the roots of his ears. He said, "There must be reciprocity. Chongshan, go find two deerskins and send them back to him with the return gifts on the fifteenth."[1]

Amid Fu Shen and Yan Xiaohan's tumultuous flirtation, the unluckiest person was Xiao Xun. Little General Xiao was very grudging. Even going to his death, he still had to drag someone in to share his fate, so he dragged Yu Qiaoting, the expert in stirring up trouble, away with him.

Fu Shen, at last left in peace, slowly let a burning hot breath out of his throat, feeling that all his internal organs were about to be burned up by the wine.

He bent down to look at the other case. As expected, under the tanned furs, he found another present: a hand-sewn pair of fur knee braces.

A pair of wild geese, a pair of knee braces; their value was no more than a handful of silver pieces, but all the other items in the two big cases were there to serve as background for these two gifts.

Fu Shen didn't know whether to sigh at the amount of thought he had put into it or scold him for being wasteful. Considered carefully, this was always Yan Xiaohan's style of conduct. He seemed to squander warmth and consideration, hand out benefits unstintingly, but he had only a little drop of sincerity, not at all sweet, hidden in a deep, dark corner.

But that bit of sincerity was like jade under a coating of stone. As soon as it came to light, it would turn everything around it into plain rock.

On the fifteenth of the first month, Yan Xiaohan received return gifts from Yanzhou. The true gifts were also mixed into a big heap of northern specialties: they were a pair of deerskins, and a… morning calm flower jade pendant.

Fu Shen's eccentric present gave Lord Yan such a fright that he hardly slept. At night, he held the jade pendant, looking it over suspiciously. Now he suspected that he knew something, now he thought that Fu Shen wanted to use this method to express "burying the hatchet." Then, thoughts running wild, he recalled Fu Shen's resolute expression when he had shattered that jade pendant—could he be planning another clean break?

Yan Xiaohan felt around for the bedside cabinet and took a small sandalwood box from it. When it was opened, there was an old jade pendant wrapped in dark red satin inside. That jade pendant had broken very thoroughly. Afterward, though Yan Xiaohan had found the best craftsman to mend it with gold, there had still been no fixing it. The jade pendant looked rough and bumpy, with uneven holes. Compared to the new one Fu Shen had sent, it was more than a little bit worse, but Yan Xiaohan had always kept it carefully, treating it as a treasure.

To this day, he could still remember his remorse as he knelt on the ground picking the broken jade up piece by piece, his despair when there had been a handful of fragments lying in his palm and he had found that there was no way to put them back together into a complete form. If not for the superior skill of the person who had mended it, Yan Xiaohan might have regretted this for the rest of his life.

Seven years ago, he had joined the Feilong Guard not long before. He was still young. Criticized and ridiculed daily by the scholar officials, he would have loved to pick up a sword and slaughter all the world's pedants. Because of this, there had been rebellion in his heart; he'd had no bottom line. The Feilong Guard had always gotten its results by hook or by crook, and Yan Xiaohan had taken his example from them. Whether it had been luck or misfortune, the first case he had been in charge of was the Jin Yunfeng case.

His first time acting "by hook or by crook," he had kicked the iron plate of Fu Shen.

For seven years, the past had been like a shackle clamped around his ankle, and it had acted as an insistent thread of gossamer delineating a clear and deeply carved bottom line for him, keeping Yan Xiaohan from treading fully into the mire and sinking in.

This jade pendant that had nearly broken to smithereens and been forced back together seemed to prop up the humble wish that was buried deep at the bottom of his heart, yet unspeakable. That was an apology he owed Fu Shen.

I'm sorry.

I didn't want... to make a clean break with you.

The two jade pendants placed side by side in the box, the broken one and the whole one, seemed exceptionally lustrous and beautiful in the lantern light, like a silent consolation from the distant north, from the old memories, from a certain person who was always stubborn when it came to speech.

Fortunately, he was coming back soon.

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1. The six etiquettes are part of the traditional Chinese marriage ceremony; this is a specific reference to the fourth etiquette, gift-giving. Wild geese are a gift that symbolize a marriage proposal. A pair of deerskins is a betrothal gift to the bride, acknowledging the engagement.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

THE TWELFTH DAY OF THE SECOND MONTH, THE FLOWER Festival.

The Marquis of Jingning Manor was decked with lanterns and colored banners, full of festive atmosphere. Crimson silk was draped over the lintel and pillars of the gate. Servants shuttled to and fro in the courtyard, making preparations for the upcoming wedding banquet.

All of a sudden, a furious roar that surged straight to the heavens sounded over the main hall.

"Where is he? Why isn't he here yet?!"

An official of the Ministry of Rites clutching at a Yan Manor servant who had come to help out, on the point of collapse, howled, "... The Marquis of Jingning hasn't returned yet? Why didn't your master say so before! Traveling a long way... He's probably made a fucking run for it!"

The Yan Manor servant, head spinning, said, "Your Honor, er, I don't know either, it's all my master's personal orders, to prepare everything as usual."

The auspicious time was approaching. The Ministry of Rites official had already lost all hope for this wedding. He had heard long ago that the Marquis of Jingning Fu Shen's temperament was unyielding, that he wouldn't submit to force. On first hearing that he had tacitly agreed to the Ministry of Rites preparing the wedding, everyone at all levels of the Ministry of Rites had breathed a sigh of relief, not expecting that when it came to the point of getting married, this ancestor would disappear without a sound!

Truly a drastic measure in an emergency, a move worthy of a master of the art of war.

With matters at this stage, he could only pray for His Majesty to be wise and not involve them, the unlucky fish in the pond, when he flew into his rage.

The Ministry of Rites official stroked his beard and the two sides of his mustache, took a deep breath, and steadied his emotions, planning to go find this wedding's other main character to discuss how they should wind up the event. He casually snatched up the servant he had spoken to before and, forcing a genial expression onto his face, asked, "Where is your Lord Yan now?"

The servant earnestly said, "The master took some people and left the city first thing this morning. He said he was going to meet the Lord Marquis… Your Honor? Your Honor! Help! Come quick! An official has fainted here!"

Outside the capital, at a travelers' pavilion on the public road.

The team accompanying the party meeting the bride looked at the sun again and again, their hearts brimming with the same concern as the unfortunate Ministry of Rites official. Trembling with fear, they asked, "Your Honor, the auspicious hour is nearly here, why… haven't we seen a sign of him yet?"

They didn't dare to say anything further, afraid lest Yan Xiaohan suddenly pull a sword out from under his wedding clothes.

Yan Xiaohan suppressed the fretfulness in his heart and calmly said, "Keep waiting."

That "Prepare your dowry. Do not let me down!" still lingered in his ears; the letter sent back from Yanzhou City, apart from telling him to await him outside the city on the wedding day, had also contained this ardent exhortation: "Paper is scant and feelings are plentiful, I will say no more. Do not renege, do not forget." Yan Xiaohan was unwilling to suspect Fu Shen, and he was even more unwilling to suspect that what he had said was a pretense laid down to cover up a snare.

But in fact, inwardly, he was more frightened than anyone. Because the scene of "a chill at heart, a knife to the back" had happened between him and Fu Shen seven years ago.

Just as Yan Xiaohan was incessantly struggling between sinking into self-scaring and rising into self-consolation, nearly drowned, a small dark speck suddenly appeared in the distance. A fast horse came racing from the distance. On the horse was a dark-skinned teenager. Before he had come close, he turned his horse's head around several yards away and loudly cried out, "Lord Yan, please follow me, the general will arrive shortly!"

Yan Xiaohan's breathing instantly eased. The boulder in his chest landed. He spurred on his horse and galloped away after the teenager.

Before the others could react, the two of them had already raced far away. Ordinary horses couldn't compare to the Beiyan Army's horses. Once they began to run, only Yan Xiaohan could just barely keep up. Toward the end, the team had fallen out of formation. The two of them were up ahead in first place, while behind them followed the ragtag jumble of the defeated "tail."

The teenager led him west the whole way. When the vague outline of a building appeared in the distance, Yan Xiaohan suddenly understood why on as important a day as today, Fu Shen would put forward a request that seemed nonsensical and willful.

The high terrace rose from level ground. Its halls were lofty. The setting sun slanting onto its glazed tiles caused layer upon layer of brilliant, beautiful golden light to emerge. Surveying it from a distance, it seemed to be built of gold. Therefore, it was named Golden Terrace.

There had been a Golden Terrace in ancient times. King Zhao of Yan, from veneration for Guo Wei, his teacher, had constructed a palace in his honor and placed a thousand pieces of gold on the terrace in order to invite all the talented individuals in the kingdom, thus giving it its name. When Great Zhou was founded, the ancestor of the dynasty, wishing to imitate King Zhao of Yan, had raised a high terrace in the capital's outskirts and erected a palace on it. The terrace was named "Golden," the palace was named "Qilin." In the main hall of the palace were hung eighteen portraits of meritorious subjects who had taken part in the founding of the dynasty, in order to make clear their merit.

Later emperors had all adhered to this method. Among successive generations of civilian officials and military officers, all of them had had members whose images were entered into Golden Terrace's Qilin Palace to celebrate their glory. By the time of the late emperor, every time the army went out on campaign, it made a pledge on the terrace. Over time, this had also become convention.

Six years ago, when Fu Shen put on armor and went out on campaign for the first time, Emperor Yuantai had personally led all the officials to Golden Terrace to see him off; half a year later, when he had returned victorious, he had been conferred the title of "Marquis of Jingning" on Golden Terrace.

Still later, Fu Shen's legs were crippled, and he no longer commanded soldiers. An imperial edict had bestowed on him an absurd marriage, and he still chose for it to happen at the starting point of all the honor and disgrace in his life.

Through dusty journeys, through blood and tears, through lofty rises and steep falls, all his life could be summarized with these lines: "To requite my king's trust at Golden Terrace, I will raise my sword and die for my king."[1]

This was his silent display of prowess, and also his profound eternal regret.

The setting sun was like a blaze, lighting up the whole countryside. At last came the sound of hoofbeats in the distance, clouds of dust billowing as a majestic team appeared at the end of the road.

The lead rider was tall and upright, his posture vigorous, urging on his horse to gallop with the force of wind and thunder. His crimson robes fluttered and flew, reflecting the sunset glow suffusing the sky, as if he were bathed in flames, coming trampling through blood.

Red robes and an untamed horse, a ferocious approach—he didn't seem to be coming to be married so much as coming to kidnap a bride.

—That was Fu Shen.

—Only this could be Fu Shen.

The instant he appeared, it was as if a heavy hammer had struck Yan Xiaohan over the heart. He could even distinctly feel his throat choked with emotion, the rims of his eyes heating up.

For months, he hadn't comforted Fu Shen, hadn't dared to touch his scars, and had often consoled himself: *Fu Shen is only unable to go into battle again, or walk on his own like an ordinary person... He only paid with a pair of legs, much better than losing his life in the Qingsha Gap.*

But in this moment, his unreasoning reaction at last acknowledged for him that his sanguinity and ease were both false; in fact, he was unreconciled, in fact... he regretted it deeply.

Fu Shen was still so young, and in the future he would have to live with a wheelchair as his companion, be an ordinary person who had difficulty walking. The dashing youth riding into the city and enticing countless girls to throw flowers and fruit, the young general who had led his troops out on campaign, galloping off light as air, even the Marquis of Jingning, regularly guarding the border passes and returning once in a while to the capital to squabble with him—none of those would exist again.

But today, that youth who had brushed past him urging on his horse had come back.

In the space of a few breaths, the team of riders had arrived in front of him. Fu Shen slowed, blew a whistle, and raised his hand to fling out a length of red silk. Yan Xiaohan automatically caught one end. From the other end came a strong tug, and his body leaned forward in response. His legs clamped around his horse's belly, and his fine steed trotted off in Fu Shen's direction.

To all appearances, it was as if the Marquis of Jingning had "fished him up" with a length of red silk.

Fu Shen was very satisfied with Yan Xiaohan's obedience and cooperation. Smiling brightly, he drew near. "You've been waiting a long time... Hey, why are you crying?"

He saw the traces of red in Yan Xiaohan's eyes at a glance and was startled. Involuntarily, he lowered his voice, and his tone softened as well. "Yan-xiong, what's the matter, did you get anxious waiting? Were you scared I wouldn't come?"

Yan Xiaohan looked at him expressionlessly. Only when Fu Shen was bristling from his stare did he turn his head away and, unable to suppress it, laugh aloud. "The wind got in my eyes."

Fu Shen pointed at him. "Since we're getting married today, I'll leave you some face. If it happens again, I'll give you something to cry about, you believe that?"

Fu Shen had come at just the right time. The sun was sinking into the west, dusk had come; it was precisely the auspicious time to carry out the marriage ceremony. Fu Shen dismounted his horse. Yan Xiaohan lifted him onto his back. Stepping over the sunset glow, he walked step by step up dignified and splendid Golden Terrace.

All of a sudden, time drew out infinitely long. Walking up seventy-two white marble steps was as solemn as if he had walked to the end of an entire lifetime.

Qilin Palace was lofty and vast. The long passage of time had given it a sense of archaic dimness. Few people set foot here. It was very still. Only the life-sized portraits hanging all over the walls regarded them, stern and august, like all the gods and

Buddhas of heaven silently regarding two mortals who had wandered by mistake into a divine palace.

Without needing Fu Shen's guidance, Yan Xiaohan had already found the portraits of Fu Jian and his sons Fu Tingzhong and Fu Tingxin hanging in a row.

An attendant following behind them silently provided two cushions. Yan Xiaohan took a casual glance at that person and found to his surprise that this was one of Beiyan's high generals, Yu Qiaoting.

Fu Shen softly said, "Put me down."

The two of them knelt side-by-side on the cushions. Yu Qiaoting took out a wine pouch and two small silver bowls. He put them in front of the two of them, then noiselessly withdrew.

Fu Shen said, "Here are my late grandfather, my late father, and my late uncle. My late mother is buried in her hometown. I will take you to pay respects to her another day." He changed direction, facing south, and said, "Come on. First bow to heaven and earth."

The two of them bowed in unison.

They turned again toward the portraits. Fu Shen raised the wine and poured it out in libation. He prayed to the emptiness, "Your unworthy son Fu Shen has had a marriage bestowed upon him by the emperor and today joins in conjugal union with Yan Xiaohan. Grandfather, Father, Second Uncle, if you can hear me in the underworld, you may rest in peace.

"Second bow to parents."

Yan Xiaohan silently bowed with him. The two of them turned again, now kneeling face to face. Fu Shen poured two cups of wine and passed one of them to Yan Xiaohan. He said, "Yan-xiong, thank you for being willing to wait here for me today."

Yan Xiaohan said, "No need for thanks. It's just what I ought to do."

Fu Shen said, "After my late grandfather died of illness, the late emperor issued an order for a portrait of him to be placed in

Qilin Palace. After his death, it was my late father who carried his portrait up Golden Terrace. In the nineteenth and twentieth years of Yuantai, my late father and late uncle departed into the West. Their portraits were brought into Qilin Palace by me.

"At the time, His Highness Prince Su wanted to be the one to bring my Second Uncle's portrait to the palace. Sadly…" He shook his head and said, "According to regulations, after the death of a worthy minister, only close kin can carry his portrait into the palace. His Highness Prince Su's love was always deep, but in the end he lacked the formal status.

"I went to war at eighteen. I have commanded the Beiyan Cavalry for more than five years. I don't dare to speak irresponsibly and say I have made a brilliant career, but my conscience is clear before heaven, earth, and man. Sadly, fate is capricious. In the future, I am afraid it will be difficult for me to lead troops again. For me, the army life ends here."

He raised his bowl of wine and clinked it against the bowl in Yan Xiaohan's hand.

"Before I went out on campaign back then, you made a wish, hoping that I would hate you for the rest of my life. Now that wish has failed to come true—I no longer hate you, Yan-xiong.

"Now it ought to be my turn to make a wish."

Yan Xiaohan's eyelids were lowered, watching him tenderly. It was as if at another word from Fu Shen, he could immediately leap to his feet and pluck the stars and moon for him.

Fu Shen, regarding him, slowly and solemnly said, "I hope that after I die, I will also be able to leave my image behind in Qilin Palace, and when that time comes, you will be the one to carry it up Golden Terrace."

Following a worthy minister's death, only close kin could carry their portrait into the palace.

There was a long silence. Yan Xiaohan made no comment, only said, "On a festive day like this, why speak such inauspicious words?"

"Everyone must die one day. There is no need to avoid speaking of it." Fu Shen didn't seem the least anxious about his answer. But the look in his eyes was earnest and sharp. "The sun and moon are the highest yet the brightest, husband and wife are the closest yet most distant. If you will promise, henceforth you will be my sole close kin."

This world was capricious. Fate toyed with people. Two people with a gulf as vast as the one between heaven and earth between them had at last by two forking roads reached one and the same turning point.

This wish was practically tantamount to "may we be together to a ripe old age"—how could Yan Xiaohan refuse him?

He took the wine cup from Fu Shen's hand, put it aside, and clasped both of his hands.

"Husband and wife bow to each other."

The two of them each leaned down and bowed solemnly. Because they were extremely close, they nearly brushed the tops of each other's heads, but their hands remained clasped throughout.

Dimly, some nameless tie seemed to connect, like the unerring fastening of a buckle at the bottoms of their hearts, letting out a crisp click.

With those three bows, they were married.

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1. Li He, Tang Dynasty poet, "Ballad of the Grand Warden of Yamen"

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

TWILIGHT CLIMBED OVER THE WINDOW LATTICES. DAYLIGHT faded. The yellowing painting scrolls on the wall disappeared in boundless dimness. Yan Xiaohan and Fu Shen exchanged cups and drank together, completing the final stage of the ceremony. They made another profound bow to the portraits of the Fu family seniors, then turned and descended Golden Terrace.

This marriage ceremony had been solemn and sorrowful, coloring the originally not very cheerful atmosphere with an even deeper gloom. Yan Xiaohan put Fu Shen on his horse's back. Wanting to ease the atmosphere, he said, "Now we should return to the Marquis Manor. Having bowed to heaven and earth, we ought to bow and give thanks for imperial kindness. With you and I both running off without a trace, the officials from the Ministry of Rites must be ready to strangle us both to death."

Fu Shen indolently said, "Let them come. I can take down ten one-handed."

The Beiyan Cavalrymen who had come to attend the ceremony were watching avidly; they roared with laughter. Yan Xiaohan, helpless, shook his head, laughing. He leapt onto his horse and rode abreast of Fu Shen. The party to meet the bride joined with the Beiyan Army into a single team, a big crowd of men and horses, which raced off grandly in the direction of the capital.

The whole capital city knew that Yan Xiaohan and Fu Shen were getting married today. Many people were keeping their heads up, on the lookout, or had even run out into the street to watch the fun. They had waited from daybreak to sundown without seeing any activity and were as frantic as ants on a hot pan. Commentary came in droves. Emperor Yuantai was waiting for news at the palace, having already dispatched people to ask at the Marquis Manor three times; the official from the Ministry of Rites had fallen into a stupor from anger and worry, fainting twice. No matter what anyone said, he refused to take part any more, insisting on retiring and returning to his hometown.

Just as the Marquis Manor and the palace were ready to turn into a mess, the north city gates suddenly opened wide and two riders in bright scarlet robes galloped out of the long, deep shadow of the city gate tower, like two last fierce flames bursting forth from the sun just about to sink beneath the horizon, sleeves and hems swelling in the wind, flitting in an instant through the twilight-shrouded, dusky old street.

Utterly easy and unchecked, utterly elegant and glad.

A cheer burst from the crowd. Without knowing who had started it, the people raised lanterns and walked out onto the streets, lamp after lamp, hundreds upon thousands, gradually forming a bright and radiant river, making the stars above fade. Where the two riders passed, countless people threw red flowers, shouting in chorus, "Congratulations on your marriage, Commander Fu!"

"Best wishes for your happiness, general!"

"Peace and health to the Lord Marquis, endless good fortune!"

Scarlet flowers fell like rain, cheers came in wave after wave, until in the end it turned unexpectedly into revelry throughout the whole city. It wasn't only Fu Shen—even Yan Xiaohan himself hadn't expected so big a spectacle.

A heart riddled with wounds was carefully lifted from the ice and snow; the feeling of that moment was hard to describe. Fu Shen was visibly moved at once. From Yan Xiaohan's point of view, it even seemed that the glitter of tears shone in his eyes.

Their steeds slowed, and the party at last stopped at the end of the Chunhe Bridge.

On the bridge and under it were people holding bright lanterns, like myriad fireflies glowing in a vast night. Fu Shen sat upright on his horse, straightened his clothes and hair, then solemnly and silently saluted all the observers in the street.

There were thousands upon thousands of words in his heart, but he only spoke one sentence, each word resounding.

"I am unworthy."

His voice was hoarse from the emotion choking it. The exploits of three generations of the Fu family were recorded in the annals of history, inscribed on tablets of stone, spoken of by tens of thousands. Fu Shen had heard enough flattering phrases that his ears had grown calluses. He had once been proud and satisfied, immeasurably complacent. When the emperor had tried to get rid of him as soon as he had outlived his usefulness, he had known rage and resentment, had felt that his claims to credit were great, that they merited the nation's profound gratitude toward him.

But when he truly learned the meaning of "the support of the people," he restrained all his arrogance, only felt apprehensive and ashamed, as insignificant as a speck of dust between heaven and earth.

The foreign enemies were not yet pacified, the empire was not yet stable. What had he, Fu Shen, done to be worthy of being thanked and remembered by so many people?

Others didn't understand, but he himself knew well that a large part of his willingness to bear "responsibility" was that he was a member of the Fu family and couldn't ruin his forebears' reputation; another small part was that he was obstinate and refused to admit defeat, that even with a thousand-pound weight over his shoulders, he would still grit his teeth and try to lift it. As for "morality," that in fact made up only a very small bit, out of step with its surroundings. He had to keep guard beside it, alone, at length, like a person protecting a candle flame, to keep it from being extinguished in a moment of carelessness by the wind and rain.

But tonight, he had suddenly discovered that, after all, he wasn't alone in obstinately guarding that lantern.

Myriad lantern flames combined, voice upon voice speaking prayers, flowers falling like rain. He seemed to have suddenly found the courage and faith to continue along this endless road.

A warm, strong hand fell on Fu Shen's shoulder and squeezed it comfortingly. It was as if he had leaned back against a solid wall. Yan Xiaohan drew near to him and softly said, "It's getting late. Let's go."

Fu Shen nodded unconsciously, then suddenly raised a hand and caught something, which he casually tucked into his lapel. Before Yan Xiaohan could react, Fu Shen had pulled up the reins and continued to urge his horse forward.

A delicate fragrance spread outward. Yan Xiaohan looked down and abruptly froze.

This was a twin lotus.

* * *

The Marquis of Jingning Manor.

Everyone had been looking out a thousand, ten thousand times, awaiting with bated breath, and had finally seen these two living ancestors return. When the Ministry of Rites official first saw Fu Shen riding a horse, he was startled, and nearly blurted out, "Lord Marquis, aren't you lame?" Fortunately, the next moment, Yan Xiaohan himself took Fu Shen into his arms and placed him in a wheelchair. Only then did he realize that Fu Shen hadn't recovered; he had just held out by force of will the whole way.

A hero in dire straits, the passage of glory. The final persistence of the crippled general touched one with admiration and made one sigh with regret.

Because of this delicate sympathy, the bellyful of anger he was holding dispersed somewhat. He didn't explode at the two of them, only cupped his hands toward them and congratulated the newlyweds on their marriage. Then, hastening, he said, "Come in quick, gentlemen, the Duke of Ying and your honored mother are waiting to receive your bow to the parents."

The position of the Feilong Guard was special. They were in the habit of disregarding civilian officials. Yan Xiaohan only gave a tepid assent, his thoughts all on looking after Fu Shen. Fu Shen thanked the official for his hard work, then gently pushed aside Yan Xiaohan, who was pushing the wheelchair, and quietly said, "No need for you to do it, let Qingheng and the others take care of it."

From the gate to the main hall, a long red carpet was spread out. Fu Shen and Yan Xiaohan each held one end of a piece of red silk. Yu Qiaoting pushed the wheelchair into the hall prepared for the wedding banquet. The whole room was brightly lit, with dragon and phoenix wedding candles lit everywhere. The guests stood one after another to congratulate them. Madam Qin was luxuriously dressed in brocades, high above on one side of the host's table, while the other side was empty. The Duke of Ying Fu Tingyi was sitting in the next seat down. Hearing them enter, he raised his eyes slightly and met Fu Shen's gaze, blank-faced.

Madam Qin had waited bitterly for several hours and had long ago lost her patience. Had she been at home, she would likely have let loose with earth-shaking curses by now. But today's wedding banquet was being held at the Marquis of Jingning

Manor, and those who had come were all the Fu family's old friends and colleagues. She had to grit her teeth and put on a composed and virtuous appearance, whether she liked it or not, to avoid damaging her reputation in front of these high officials and eminent personages.

However, as soon as she saw Fu Shen and Yan Xiaohan, she instantly couldn't resist laughing.

Before, she and her children had lived cowering in Fu Shen's shadow, with the whole Duke of Ying Manor's attitude of "We only listen to the eldest gentleman, not to the younger gentleman," but now the wheel had turned. However presumptuous and arrogant Fu Shen might be, what did it matter? In the end, he was still going to be married off to a man. He still had to swallow the knocked-out teeth and blood and respectfully kowtow to her, the duke's lady!

"Truly this child doesn't spare a person from worry. How could you be late on the day of your wedding? And you've missed the auspicious time, made so many people wait for you for two hours for no reason." Madam Qin hadn't even left her chair. In an affected manner, she enumerated Fu Shen's faults. "It was one thing when you were running wild at home, but in the future when you're married, you can't keep being so willful."

Saying so, she turned to Yan Xiaohan and warmly said, "Menggui, Jingyuan is a spoiled child. If you find him improper in any way, I hope you'll bear with him."

This speech was nauseating. Dead silence fell over the whole hall. You could have heard a pin drop. Everyone present knew about the Duke of Ying's little family drama. Without prearrangement, everyone sat up straight and pricked up their ears, having a premonition that there was about to be a great show.

Fu Shen's face instantly darkened. He was just about to explode when someone took hold of his shoulder and pressed down lightly, indicating for him not to move. Yan Xiaohan's voice sounded above his head as he unhurriedly said, "Well said. If I don't bear with him, who will?"

These words of his sounded a little like ridicule. Linking cause and effect, everyone present thought that he was dissatisfied with this forced marriage.

Only Fu Shen heard a trace of veiled, subdued foolish bragging and possessiveness.

The anger in his chest instantly died out, the corners of his mouth indistinctly turned up. Under the strength of Yan Xiaohan's pressure on his shoulder, he relaxed his shoulders and prepared to focus on watching the show—if not for the fact that the circumstances didn't permit it, he would have even crossed one leg over the other.

Madam Qin was evidently very satisfied with Yan Xiaohan. She matter-of-factly believed that Yan Xiaohan detested Fu Shen. The enemy of my enemy is my friend—he would certainly stand on the same battle line as her.

With an affable and magnanimous smile, she said, "Don't keep standing, hurry up and bow to the parents. We can't hold up you two performing the ceremony…"

Hardly had she spoken than Yan Xiaohan suddenly interrupted her: "Wait a moment."

"What's the matter?"

Yan Xiaohan said, "Jingyuan's parents are already dead. The two of us ought to bow to their memorial tablets. Why do I not see the tablets in the wedding hall?"

Madam Qin froze. "Well…"

Yan Xiaohan continued, "And where did you crop up from, daring to snatch the host's table and receive mine and Jingyuan's bows? Aren't you afraid of shortening your lifespan?"

Fu Shen, listening, wanted to applaud him. Madam Qin's face turned from red to white and then to green. Her lips and the hands beneath her wide sleeves trembled incessantly. She had never expected that Yan Xiaohan would suddenly attack her. She wanted to retort, but she was scared into keeping silent by the smiling, murderous look he sent her way.

This was a true Feilong Guard!

Before she could answer, Yan Xiaohan, seeming already fed up with wasting words on her, coldly said, "Men, drag her out."

As soon as he gave the order, two Feilong Guards immediately stood up out of the crowd. With movements as quick as if they had been rehearsed, they grabbed Madam Qin's arms and pulled her down from the host's table, then dragged her toward the gate.

Madam Qin finally came back to herself in her panic. She struggled wildly and screamed, but when she had only screamed two words, she was gagged by the efficient Feilong Guards.

"Mmph-mmph" sounds faded gradually into the distance. Dead silence was restored in the wedding hall. All the guests were expressionless, though inwardly filled with terror—this was conduct worthy of the infamous Feilong Guard! Too arrogant!

Misfortunes came quickly, and resolutions were also quick. In a flash, the dust had settled. When Madam Qin had been dragged far away, Fu Ya finally started as if waking from a dream. He hopped up and charged up in front of Yan Xiaohan. Furiously, he said, "Shameless ruffian! You dare to humiliate my mother?!"

He raised his fists, ready to punch him, but Yan Xiaohan sent him flying several feet away with a single kick. Only after kicking him did he ask, "And who's this?"

Fu Shen was about to die of laughter. Not everyone at the feast was purely watching the fun. There were just a couple of kindhearted people who, seeing that Fu Ya still couldn't get up after being kicked by Yan Xiaohan, fearfully soothed, "That's the Fu family's little young master, the Lord Marquis's little brother. His birth mother is, um… that Madam Qin just now. A great man can afford to be broad-minded. Do not squabble with a child."

Yan Xiaohan gave an "oh" and said in astonishment, "I have only ever heard of Young Master Fu, not of Little Young Master Fu. So he's Jingyuan's half-brother by another mother. It was a misunderstanding."

On his end, just as Fu Ya caught his breath with difficulty, he heard Yan Xiaohan hypocritically call this "a misunderstanding." He nearly spat blood. He was ashamed and angry. His eyes burned red. He felt around behind himself for something he had knocked down and without so much as looking threw it, loudly swearing, "That's fucking bullshit you're talking!"

His aim wasn't very accurate. This hidden weapon didn't fly toward Yan Xiaohan, but flew toward Fu Shen instead, where it was easily caught by him and brought up in front of his eyes. It was half of a broken porcelain bowl.

Yan Xiaohan was still wrangling, unwilling to let him off. "Little Young Master Fu's mouth is really too filthy. His education has been inadequate..." Halfway through, he looked down and saw the bowl in Fu Shen's hand. When his gaze fell on the cold light at the broken edge, his expression instantly darkened.

Murderous anger soared several feet over his head. Grimly grinding his teeth, he said, "You actually dared to use this kind of sharp object to try to kill your own older brother. Truly monstrous audacity."

Everyone's hearts were simply about to beat their way out of their chests and throw themselves at Yan Xiaohan's face: *You're lying through your teeth! The boy didn't want to kill his big brother, he wanted to justly and honestly hit you!* Even when it came to confounding white and black, there still had to be limits!

Fu Shen covered his mouth with his hand. Holding back laughter, he gave a few stifled coughs. As if only now remembering that such a person as him existed, Yan Xiaohan bent down and urged him, "Don't get angry... A wedding day isn't suitable for creating disturbances, but since we have been wed, and a husband and wife are one, as movement is inconvenient for you, I couldn't avoid taking matters into my own hands and disciplining this disrespectful, mean-tongued little brother for you. I don't suppose the Lord Marquis minds?"

His tone was profoundly tender, but the menace in his words was immediately evident.

The game had to be played up to the hilt. Fu Shen's expression became troubled. "No…"

Yan Xiaohan mildly said, "The Feilong Guard know their business. There won't be blood. They'll just teach him a little lesson to keep it from happening again."

Fu Shen hesitated briefly, then said in frustration, "Then let's do as you say."

Yan Xiaohan straightened up in satisfaction and turned to the Feilong Guards who had stood awaiting orders. "Did you hear what the Lord Marquis said? Take Little Young Master Fu away, give him a few light smacks with a plank, just enough for him to understand his error and repent."

The court officials familiar with the Feilong Guard's methods couldn't resist shuddering. Their eyes were full of sympathy as they looked at Fu Ya: beating him until he understood his error meant that they wouldn't stop, would beat him to death…

The ruthless Feilong Guards picked up Fu Ya and dragged him away.

A perfectly nice wedding banquet had been turned into a series of unexpected disturbances, making people feel that it would be a torment to continue sitting there. And worst off of all was the Marquis of Jingning Fu Shen, because the savage and peremptory Feilong Guard Imperial Investigator was still unwilling to stop. Yan Xiaohan made clear his intentions, complaining with deep feeling, "It's true that every family has its problems. We've only just been married, and already there's this heap of vexations to deal with. I don't know how much they'll plague us in the future…"

The Feilong Guard ordinarily brought about miscarriages of justice and the imprisonment of the innocent; when it came to abusing a loyal and upright person, their tricks multiplied exponentially. Yan Xiaohan was something else; after dealing with these two people, he went over to brag and petition for a reward, giving all kinds of "praise me now" hints.

Fu Shen fixed his eyes on him with a not-quite-smile. His heart softened uncontrollably. Softly, he said, "You've been to quite a lot of trouble, my good wife."

Yan Xiaohan's gaze suddenly deepened and stilled.

Fu Shen had no idea of the consequences his casual teasing would incur. Not long after, the turbulent events of the wedding banquet at the Marquis of Jingning Manor spread rapidly through the streets, passed from mouth to mouth and were touched up with speculation, and finally became "The accursed Feilong Guard, right in front of the Marquis of Jingning's face, insulted his mother, beat his little brother, and finally forced him to praise him for his virtues."

Too arrogant! Utterly shameless! The court's dog was once again abusing a loyal and upright person!

But more about the aftermath later. When the present drama had broken up, the wedding banquet on the agenda still had to continue. After seeing off Madam Qin and her son, everyone's gazes turned in unison upon the sole person on the stage still in good condition, the Duke of Ying Fu Tingyi.

Unlike his father and two older brothers, Fu Tingyi had been frail since childhood, without the makings to study military arts. Every day, he only shut himself up in his room and studied; he had no sense of presence and wasn't very close to anyone in his family. Later, his brothers had died one after the other, and when the Duke of Ying Manor had urgently required someone to come out to assume responsibility, the majority of the pressure had been lifted by Fu Shen leading troops beyond the pass. Only then had Fu Tingyi stood up unhurriedly and inherited the title. After the Duke of Ying Manor and the Marquis of Jingning Manor split, this virtually invisible Duke's life had become even more secluded. It was said that he was obsessed with cultivating immorality and alchemical concoctions, declining daily along with the Duke of Ying Manor.

Because of the outstanding people who had come before him in the family, the commentary in the streets concerning this Third Master seemed far harsher. Everyone said Fu Tingyi had no good qualities and relied entirely on a lucky reincarnation; purely for plugging a leak, he was set for life. Wasn't he currently seeking immorality and practicing Daoism? Perhaps one day while plugging the leak, he would ascend to heaven right in broad daylight!

Whatever Madam Qin did, Fu Shen had always maintained his respect for this Third Uncle. Whether he really had no interest in everyday matters or was deliberately hiding his abilities and biding his time, the Duke of Ying Manor had been so subdued in recent years that Fu Shen's rear had been stable, sparing him a good deal of misgiving.

He indicated for Yan Xiaohan to push him in front of Fu Tingyi and raised his hands to salute. He said, "Third Uncle."

On his nephew's wedding day, Fu Tingyi was actually still dressed in Daoist robes. In recent years, he had often fasted and kept a vegetarian diet. His appearance was lean, with a long strand of beard beneath his chin; he really did seem to have something of the bearing of a transcendent being. Such a great disturbance had taken place, yet he hadn't made a sound throughout, watching without seeming to see, resting his eyes while silently reciting Daoist scriptures. Not until Fu Shen called to him did he slightly open his eyes.

Fu Tingyi's eyes were deep and radiant, his tone of voice misty. "No need to bow to me. Your parents' memorial tablets are both in the ancestral hall at home. If you wish, you may go yourself to pay your respects."

It was unclear whom these words were addressed to. He didn't wait for a response. Acting for himself, he stood, swept his sleeves, and floated off.

This time, even the Feilong Guards looked at Fu Shen with sympathy in their eyes: their Imperial Investigator had lost both parents at a young age and had no family, which was already tragic enough; but the Marquis of Jingning's family… It was better to have none.

Luckily, Fu Shen didn't care at all. He and Yan Xiaohan had already paid their respects to their elders on Golden Terrace. The remainder was no cause for anxiety. It was just as well that they had all left; he had wanted to leave long ago.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

THE WEDDING BANQUET CONTINUED LATE INTO THE NIGHT. WHEN they had seen off the last group of guests, Yan Xiaohan said to Fu Shen, “We’ll leave it to the servants to clean up here. Come stay at my manor for now.”

He presumed that Fu Shen would have no sentimental attachment to the Marquis Manor and wouldn’t refuse the invitation. But Fu Shen briefly muttered to himself, then actually refused. “No need. I ought to have mentioned it to you before, but when things got busy I forgot. After getting married, I was planning to move to a country estate outside the city to recuperate. I’ll write down the address for you in a little while. If you need anything, you can go there to see me.”

Yan Xiaohan’s pupils contracted slightly, but his voice was still calm. “Living apart right after getting married? Is it because I failed to be an attentive host before?”

“It’s no such thing, don’t be oversensitive.” Fu Shen tilted his head and glanced out the door out of the corner of his eye. Quietly he said, “I have a group of Beiyan soldiers with me. How would it look if they all came to stay at your manor?”

Only then did Yan Xiaohan relax very slightly and feel less choked, but profound regret appeared in his eyes. "You can't even stay for one night?"

Fu Shen's little heart wavered, softening nearly to the point of melting away. Smiling, he asked, "So reluctant to give me up?"

The two of them were whispering to each other in the bridal chamber with red candles burning high, one deliberately tempting, one with a mind to yield. This was plainly an ordinary conversation, but the atmosphere was still unbearably enchanting.

Yan Xiaohan said, "I prepared some things. I thought that when you got back, you might be able to use them… but it seems now that it was superfluous of me."

Though he knew perfectly well that he could only believe half of what came out of Yan Xiaohan's mouth and the better part of his seemingly genuine loneliness and melancholy were playacting, Fu Shen still couldn't resist compromising.

"How can kind intentions be called superfluous?" He squeezed Yan Xiaohan's hand and sincerely said, "I was wrong not to tell you ahead in advance. That being the case, I'll thank you for your hospitality tonight."

Yan Xiaohan dropped his gaze, looking at the hand he was holding, and agreed. "That is all I could wish for."

When he saw the scarlet lanterns hanging from Yan Manor's gate, Fu Shen at last woke from his disoriented state and felt that Yan Xiaohan might have been a child abductor before joining the Feilong Guard. Probably General Fu himself hadn't expected that after so many years of firm and unyielding will, he would submit so smoothly, without so much as a stutter.

He and the wheelchair were placed beneath the eaves facing the courtyard. Yan Xiaohan walked forward slowly, pushing him.

When the two of them reached the central building, they didn't stop. Fu Shen was about to warn him of the steps up ahead when he felt the wheelchair glide down a slope, smooth and uninterrupted.

Fu Shen's heart trembled fiercely.

He had at last discovered how this house was different from before: all the places with steps had been flattened, turned into gentle slopes; the thresholds meanwhile had all been taken down, leaving only an expanse of level floor. It was evident at a glance that this was specially designed for a person in the house who couldn't walk well and relied on a wheelchair.

For the average person, with a cripple in the house, just taking care of them would exhaust their mental and physical efforts. Very few people were willing to put in a great deal of work to convert the inconvenient steps and thresholds. But Yan Xiaohan, knowing perfectly well that their marriage was only for appearances and that Fu Shen wouldn't live here long-term, had still silently altered the whole house.

All human hearts were flesh. To say that he was unmoved would be a lie.

Though they had bowed to the parents, made a promise, Fu Shen and Yan Xiaohan had just taken the first step of sincerity. There were still countless secrets and disagreements separating them. Neither could clearly say just what there was between them. Too many things were mixed into these feelings. And that bit of interest, that bit of affection, were like drops in the sea, seeming negligible.

Could negligible emotions be brought to this degree?

Unlike the bombastic decorations of the Marquis of Jingning Manor, Yan Manor had evidently been put in order with painstaking efforts, everything exquisite, both gorgeous and quiet. Fu Shen even saw some potted orchids in the rooms and involuntarily recalled his discovery in the town in Beiyan. With a pretense of carelessness, he asked, "After all these years, Yanxiong still likes orchids?"

Yan Xiaohan's hands tightened unconsciously on the wheelchair. Then he calmly said, "If we weren't pressed for time, I would have prepared you a pool of twin lotuses."

These words hit Fu Shen precisely in his heart of hearts. For a time, he didn't respond.

Yan Xiaohan seemed to be taking him around on a tour. He pushed the wheelchair through one building after another, through the corridors, and finally stopped outside a small room very close to the bedroom.

Fu Shen remembered this place. This was the bathing room.

"Are we going in?" Fu Shen raised his head and asked him. "What's there to look at in the bathing room?" Wasn't it just a screen and some tubs—

Yan Xiaohan opened the door.

At the door stood a large jade screen with a design of mountains and rivers. Go around it, and behind was a scene of unearthly beauty.

A number of rooms had been opened up, connected into a single bright and spacious big room. The room was empty, with no other furnishings than a big bathing pool made of jade steps in the center of the floor. The water hadn't been heated, and there was only half a pool of clear water in it, so clear you could see the bottom. By the candlelight and the crystalline reflections off the water, carvings of lotuses and lifelike swimming fish could be faintly seen at the bottom of the pool.

"This..."

Yan Xiaohan pushed Fu Shen inside and explained, "You can't walk. With no one to support you, it would be easy for you to trip and fall. So I had this pool installed here. I don't know whether it is to the Lord Marquis's liking?"

Fu Shen had been slammed by one after another of his "surprises" until he couldn't quite come back to his senses. Before he could completely understand the meaning of this bathing pool, Yan Xiaohan walked up in front of him from behind, knelt down to bring his line of sight level with Fu Shen's. With his hands on his knees, he earnestly said, "Jingyuan, I've repaired the courtyard, planted the wutong tree, and now... I'm only waiting for the phoenix to come."

The "phoenix" that had not only not come but was planning to fly elsewhere was speechless.

He suddenly wanted to ask Yan Xiaohan, *Do you know the saying "Lord Ye's love of dragons?"*[1] *How can you be certain that I'm the phoenix you want?*

But the smoothed steps, the enormous bathing pool, and the sincerity in his eyes—none of those were false.

"This won't do, Yan-xiong." Fu Shen leaned forward slightly and tapped the center of his brow with the slightly cold, dry tip of his finger. Smiling, he said, "If you want to attract a phoenix, you have to sing 'The Phoenix's Mating Song.'"

Yan Xiaohan raised one long eyebrow and met his eyes thoughtfully. His meaning was very clear: *Are you that experienced? Then you sing it.*

Fu Shen laughed.

There was only a single sheet of window paper between them, yet the two of them stopped here by tacit agreement and didn't break through. With a balance this delicate, perhaps only the people within it could get a precise handle on it—maybe it was that their emotions had not yet reached the depths, were not yet sufficiently accommodating and natural; and maybe it was that these two both had extraordinary patience and could only find a true answer amid countless clashes and attempts.

Because the court did not require that they occupy a bridal chamber, that night, the two of them did as before, with Fu Shen in the bedroom and Yan Xiaohan sleeping in a side wing. At some point, this relationship in which the roles of host and guest were reversed had become routine, and everyone throughout Yan Manor viewed it as normal. Their positions had already been fixed, but it was only today that Fu Shen could be said to have legitimately entered the inner chamber.

Silent consideration was the deadliest. Fu Shen had already suffered once at Yan Xiaohan's hands in the past; sadly, he had yet to learn his lesson.

First thing the next morning, while Yan Manor's two masters were still deeply asleep, there was a knock at the main gate. Yu

Qiaoting was standing outside the gate, his expression grave. "Excuse me. I come on pressing business and must see the Lord Marquis at once."

The butler invited him to wait briefly in the reception pavilion. Not long after, Yan Xiaohan came out of an inner room pushing Fu Shen. Both their complexions were looking healthful; it seemed they hadn't had a wild night. Ordinarily, Yu Qiaoting would certainly have teased a bit, but today, as soon as he saw them, without waiting for Fu Shen to ask "Have you eaten?," he said to Yan Xiaohan, "Lord Yan, I have urgent military business to discuss with the general."

Yan Xiaohan was tactful and understanding. He said, "If you'll excuse me," then went out to call for the servants to prepare breakfast.

Fu Shen said, "What's happened?"

Yu Qiaoting took out a palm-sized wooden box and presented it to him with both hands. "I stayed the night at the Marquis Manor. This morning, a servant came to see me and said that while making an inventory of the wedding gifts, he had discovered this item."

As soon as Fu Shen saw the falcon totem on the lid, he understood. "Something belonging to the Zhe Clan?"

Yu Qiaoting said, "Look inside, general."

The box had no mechanism. Fu Shen pushed aside the latch and lifted the lid. The reek of blood hit him in the face. Frowning, he said, "... What the hell is this?"

The wooden box was full of pearls, about enough for two handfuls, plump and smooth, gently lustrous. Though Fu Shen didn't care for precious metals or jewels, because he had spent a long time at the border and regularly inspected the annual tributes, he saw at a glance that each and every one of these pearls seemed to be tribute grade.

These pearls were produced in the northeast, the gathering place of the Zhe Clan, and were therefore known as eastern pearls; they were very valuable. But the eastern pearls in the box in Fu Shen's hands, which ought to have been milky in color, seemed to have been scooped out of blood. They were tainted all over with mottled bloodstains, giving them an extremely strange and inauspicious look.

"Have you discovered who sent this?" This thing wasn't frightening, only nauseating. Fu Shen said, "Was there any document along the lines of a calling card?"

Yu Qiaoting shook his head. "There were too many notes received yesterday. Perhaps there was one, but we wouldn't be able to find it at once."

Fu Shen casually replaced the lid and passed the wooden box to Yu Qiaoting. He sneered coldly. "Cheap hocus-pocus. Eight hundred years later, they're still up to the same old tricks. Don't pay it any mind. I figure that group of numbskulls saw that I was getting married and deliberately sent it to add to my vexation. Go get rid of it, don't let Yan Xiaohan find out."

With him as composed as usual, Yu Qiaoting relaxed slightly, but he still felt faintly concerned. He took the box and put it away. Fu Shen said, "Has what I arranged been completed?"

Yu Qiaoting said, "Set your mind at ease, general. Will you be leaving for the country today?"

Fu Shen muttered silently to himself, worried that if he left now Yan Xiaohan would be unhappy, but when he considered his later arrangements, he knew he had to leave whether he wanted to or not. Finally, he nodded. "Prepare things. I'll go over there today."

Here, the two from Beiyan weren't to be interrupted, and elsewhere, Yan Xiaohan didn't get to eat his breakfast. Not long after Yu Qiaoting came in, a scout from the Feilong Guard also hurriedly came to the door. "Your Honor, last night a headless corpse was dredged from a well in Dongwang Village in Zuoning County. The case was reported to officials in Shuntian Prefecture and the body underwent identification. It has already been confirmed that it belongs to General Mu Boxiu of the Right Jinwu Guard, who recently disappeared."

About half a month earlier, right at the time of the New Year, the Right Jinwu Guard's General Mu Boxiu had suddenly disappeared without a trace. His departure had been very sudden, but it also hadn't seemed to be entirely without preparation. He had taken nothing that could indicate his identity. He had only carried away some old clothes and some money and possessions. His family had even thought he had gone out eating and drinking with his colleagues. Only when he didn't return after several days did they come weeping to report to the authorities.

At the outset, this case hadn't attracted any notice. It had only been investigated by the local authorities in Shuntian Prefecture. Because the matter involved a court official, the case had also been reported to the Feilong Guard. It had passed before Yan Xiaohan's eyes, then been set aside. No one had thought that a strong and robust Jinwu Guard would get himself robbed or murdered. Perhaps he was keeping a lover somewhere and, too happy to remember his duty, was hanging back, not coming home.

But today, Mu Boxiu's headless corpse had been recovered from a dried-up well in a village in the capital's outskirts.

A disappearance and a homicide case involving a court official were of such different gravity that they couldn't be spoken of in the same breath.

Yan Xiaohan asked, "Has the head been found?"

The scout said, "Not yet. The local authorities have already ordered the entire village sealed off and are exerting all their efforts to search."

Yan Xiaohan said, "Go request the file from Shuntian Prefecture and dig up everything there is about his family. I'll go to the palace at once. Have Jiang Shu take some people to the village to keep an eye on things but not reveal their identities, only investigate in secret. This matter concerns the South Yamen. I'm afraid His Majesty will be unwilling to let the Feilong Guard have a hand in it."

The scout went to obey orders. Yan Xiaohan was anxious to go to the palace and had no time to spare to eat a normal meal. He hurriedly ate a couple of mouthfuls of pastry and went to change his clothes. By the time he was cleaned up, by chance Fu Shen and Yu Qiaoting had also finished their discussion. Seeing his appearance, Fu Shen said in surprise, "Are you going out?"

"Official business," Yan Xiaohan explained concisely, then bent down and gently hugged him. Into his ear, he rapidly instructed: "I know you have to leave today. There's breakfast ready outside, eat before you go, take care on the way. If you like anything in this manor, go right ahead and take it. I can't see you off myself today, I'm sorry. When I've dealt with this matter, I'll go see you."

Fu Shen gently patted his shoulder and sighed. "I think you'd better leave the official business alone and lie down in a crate and come with me."

Without prearrangement, the two of them laughed. Yan Xiaohan straightened up, then saluted Yu Qiaoting. "I'll be going now. I'll trouble you to look after Jingyuan, general."

General Yu seemed to be fed up before he had even eaten breakfast. Numbly, he said, "No problem."

Near eleven in the morning, a carriage stopped before the gate of a villa at the foot of Mount Changle in the capital's outskirts.

Seen from outside the gate, this villa was no different from an ordinary manor in the mountains, surrounded as usual by hill and water, the environment quiet and beautiful. But once you went through the main gate, a ruthless and grim murderous aura would instantly hit you in the face. Inside, the manor was full of armed Beiyan Cavalrymen making the rounds, patrolling and keeping guard day and night, turning this perfectly good manor into a Beiyan Army barracks, sealed tight as a drum.

This time, apart from Yu Qiaoting, Army Doctor Du Leng and Xiao Xun, in command of a team of personal guards, had also accompanied Fu Shen back to the capital, ostensibly under the cover of "escorting the bride" but in reality for the sake of guarding this manor.

Fu Shen sat in his wheelchair and was pushed by Yu Qiaoting into the rear courtyard. Xiao Xun opened a secret door, revealing the dark, clammy underground passage behind it.

Yu Qiaoting and Xiao Xun, one on either side, lifted Fu Shen's wheelchair and went down the long flight of stone steps. The oil lamps on the stone walls lit up one by one. Illumination gradually spread, until it had reached the deepest recesses of the underground passage, lighting up a gruesome scene to chill the stomach.

There was a prisoner's cage there, with stone walls on three sides and iron bars on one. There was moldy rice straw spread over the ice-cold, damp floor. A human figure wearing only a white inner robe was huddled in a corner, hair disheveled, covering his face with his hands, his eyes stabbed so hard by the sudden radiance that he couldn't open them.

The wheelchair rolled over the ground, making a rumbling noise, accompanied by extremely soft footsteps, coming closer and closer and at last stopping in front of the iron bars.

"How is it? Have you gotten used to it here?"

The man's low, intimate, smiling voice resounded in the prison, perfectly controlled, not at all somber, yet it made the prisoner in the corner leap up like a fish, as if he had been injected with poison.

He seemed to have been scared out of his mind. His teeth chattered. Shakily, he said, "... You?"

"Yes, me." Fu Shen sat upright and still and mildly said, "How long since we last met. It seems that General Mu still remembers me.

"Oh, no. I ought to say, the late Right Jinwu Guard General, Mu Boxiu."

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1. Meaning someone professing to love something while actually fearing it—the idiom comes from a story about a man who put dragons on all his furnishings but was frightened out of his wits when a real dragon came to visit, because he only liked things that looked like dragons but weren't really dragons.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

THE DEEPEST FEAR APPEARED IN MU BOXIU'S EYES. "YOU, you…"

Fu Shen smiled faintly. "Aren't you still alive and well? If you don't believe it, pinch your thigh, see whether it hurts."

The more false courtesy he displayed, the more he dodged and circled, not entering upon the main subject, the more uneasy Mu Boxiu became. He wished he could simply die rather than be tortured at Fu Shen's hands.

"Why does it seem to me that General Mu is very scared of me?" Fu Shen asked with interest. "You fear me more than death, hm?"

In fact, it wasn't as if Fu Shen was part of the Feilong Guard, who struck terror into people's hearts with the sound of their name, and on top of that he was a handsome and charming young fellow. An ordinary person shouldn't have trembled so humiliatingly on seeing him.

Mu Boxiu clenched his teeth. Putting on a fierce expression over his cowardly insides, he said sternly, "Privately imprisoning an official of the court? Aren't you afraid the Feilong Guard's investigation will reach you, General Fu?!"

Yu Qiaoting and Xiao Xun stirred uneasily.

Fu Shen laughed and even clapped twice. "Permit me to give you a word of warning, General Mu. Don't forget that you're already a 'dead man' whose corpse is lying in Shuntian Prefecture. In other words, do you think you'll have the chance to leave here alive?

"As for the Feilong Guard, their Imperial Investigator is mine now. Their investigation will reach me? I'm looking forward to it."

Yu Qiaoting gave a cough, reminding him to observe propriety, get to the serious business, and stop bragging.

Mu Boxiu finally noticed that Fu Shen was actually just toying with him, like a cat that had caught a rat and wasn't in a hurry to eat it, wanting to play until it was half-dead first. At the end of his endurance, he finally said, "What do you actually want?"

Fu Shen said, "You're a smart man. I've appeared before you sitting in a wheelchair. Can't you guess what I want?"

Mu Boxiu clenched his teeth. "I don't know."

Fu Shen's smile instantly turned cold. He said softly, "Watch yourself. I'm only going to ask once. Will you answer?"

Mu Boxiu said as before, "I don't know."

Before the tail-end of the word "know" had faded, Fu Shen attacked without warning. A cold gleam flashed, whistling through the air, and a crossbow bolt whizzed as it entered Mu Boxiu's left shoulder.

Acute pain exploded from the sudden puncture. Mu Boxiu had been entirely unprepared. He let out a dull groan.

Fu Shen held a cleverly-made miniature crossbow. The second bolt was pointed at his right shoulder. "Do you still not want to talk?"

Mu Boxiu broke out in cold sweat from the pain. He leaned feebly against the wall, unwilling to answer.

Fu Shen, entirely pitiless, shot another bolt.

The force of this bolt was even greater. The sharp arrowhead went right through the shoulder, firmly nailing Mu Boxiu to the wall.

Fu Shen indolently loaded a new bolt and gently said, "It doesn't matter if you don't want to speak now. Before you get shot into a sieve, you'll have a great deal of time to think things over slowly. A dead man can't speak, so I'd have to drop it, but you're a living man. Is there any need for me to worry that you won't speak?"

This time he took aim at Mu Boxiu's right leg. "Set your mind at ease, my archery skills are quite good. If I want to hit your right leg, I certainly won't hit your left by mistake.

"Three."

When the third bolt flew out, Mu Boxiu let out an inhuman scream.

The blood flowing out of him had soaked the ground. Sadly, the three people in front of him were iron-willed military officers who killed without batting an eye. Faced with this cruel torture, no one called it to a halt. The lofty gazes seemed to be regarding an insect, abruptly making Mu Boxiu feel a more frightening chill than death.

Fu Shen's lips parted slightly. As the word "four" was about to leave his mouth, the prisoner in the cell at last gave up his resistance. In a weak voice, he moaned, "… I'll talk."

Fu Shen urbanely said, "Go ahead."

"Your guess is right," Mu Boxiu said. "We carried out the Qingsha Gap attack under orders. I personally shot the arrow that failed to hit you."

Fu Shen reached a hand out to one side, and Xiao Xun passed him a cracked wooden box. Fu Shen opened the box and displayed its inside to Mu Boxiu. He asked, "Was it this arrow?"

Mu Boxiu struggled to raise his head and take a look. "Yes."

The crossbow bolt was entirely pitch-black, about seven inches long, with a flat three-cornered steel arrowhead with two deep notches along the sides. The end of the arrow had the "military" character that was the imprint of the Military Arms

Office. Where the arrowhead met the shaft was a “leopard” character drawn in a single stroke that looked like a wild animal.

Yan Xiaohan had told Fu Shen that this “leopard” character represented the Baotao Guard.

The Baotao Guard was one of the imperial family’s guard teams, belonging to the Ten South Yamen Guards, a very discreet imperial guard team. The original meaning of “baotao” was a quiver made from leopard skin, because the Baotao Guard frequently stood sentinel in the imperial city’s heights and were skilled in archery; from this they took their name.

And the arrow in Fu Shen’s hand came from the Military Arms Office’s crossbow workshop, made for imperial guard use. He had ordered an investigation. Several years ago, the crossbow workshop had manufactured a batch of armor-piercing bolts for use with a miniature crossbow and distributed them for use by the imperial guards and the imperial city’s troops, but because, while this arrow had a long range, its demands on the archer’s arm strength were too great, and only one arrow could be shot at a time, it was of trifling value, so it hadn’t spread widely throughout the armed forces. The bolts that hadn’t been put to good use had been tossed into some unknown storehouse to collect dust.

This arrow had been a momentary event within the imperial guard. Fu Shen had never seen it before. And the weapons of the imperial guard were updated extremely quickly. Everyone had long ago forgotten that they had once used crossbow bolts like these.

If not for the hint given to him by the piece of paper that had been caught between the box’s layers, as well as Yan Xiaohan’s verification, Fu Shen’s people probably still wouldn’t have found any concrete leads.

“I didn’t expect you to be able to find this. I thought it was buried in the Qingsha Gap.” Mu Boxiu lay dejectedly on the ground, face up, his eyes hollow. Blankly, he whispered, “This is the will of heaven…”

While the miniature crossbow developed by the Military Arms Office wasn't suitable for use in war, it excelled in portability and maneuverability, with enormous destructive force. It was a rather convenient weapon for use in assassinations.

But this crossbow bolt had become a fatal error on Mu Boxiu's part. He had always held posts in the imperial guard, first in the Baotao Guard, later being transferred to the Jinwu Guard. All weapons used by the imperial guard came from the Military Arms Office, which had led to Mu Boxiu ignoring a piece of common sense out of force of habit: the ordinary crossbow bolts used by military forces in other places wouldn't have the "military" character stamp of the Military Arms Office.

Fu Shen wasn't in the mood to hear his belated repentance. He cut straight to the point and asked, "Who was the mastermind behind the attack in the Qingsha Gap?"

Mu Boxiu seemed to have heard a colossal joke. He began to laugh hoarsely. "General Fu, I'm already here. Don't you know yet who wants to kill you?"

Fu Shen, keeping his cool, said, "I don't know. If I knew, I wouldn't have asked you."

Did he really not know?

During the attack in the Qingsha Gap, the problem had come from the route known only to the Beiyan Army's own people. Fu Shen's greatest suspicion at the time had been that someone had betrayed them to a foreign nation; only after that had come the faint suspicion that his and Prince Su's private little machinations had angered Emperor Yuantai. Regardless of which possibility it was, there was a plant in the Beiyan Army. He had used his injury as an opportunity to withdraw from the position of commander, wanting to find that plant, but before Fu Shen could take any action, this crossbow bolt that constituted crucial evidence had been delivered right to him.

He had long ago become a splinter in the emperor's eye, a thorn in his flesh. Even if Fu Shen handed back half of his military authority, like a gecko breaking off its own tail, cut ties with the Duke of Ying Manor, acted with the greatest caution, secluded himself in a corner at the northern border, he still couldn't escape the emperor's profound suspicion and jealousy.

Ignorant, naïve, and stupid—if not him, who ought to be killed?

Mu Boxiu laughed dementedly. He raised his injured arm and pointed upward. He yelled, "The will of heaven! Don't understand yet? It's heaven that wants to kill you!"

Yu Qiaoting clenched his fists. Xiao Xun breathed hard. Though they had been aware of it already, hearing with one's own ears the identification by the perpetrator after all came with a different kind of feeling of having been stabbed than what one had guessed for oneself.

Fu Shen was calmer than either of them. He had experienced the dual shocks of the truth being revealed and of the arranged marriage. The deepest, most unforgettable piercing pain had already passed. Luckily he'd had Yan Xiaohan beside him then. Though Fu Shen hadn't displayed it much, with Yan Xiaohan's acuteness, he must have guessed some of the truth, or else he wouldn't have given him care that could be rated as painstaking and consideration that had been virtually obedience in all things.

It had to be said that Yan Xiaohan's methods were skillful. When Fu Shen recalled the past now, the feelings of hatred and suffering were very faint. What he remembered instead were insignificant daily trifles between the two of them.

"What a pity that I didn't die. I'm truly sorry." Fu Shen was expressionless. "Listen carefully. I'm asking you who conveyed the order to you, who got the gunpowder and via what channel, who was it above you who planned out this ambush?"

This person who could make His Majesty go around the Feilong Guard and hand over as important a secret as an assassination attempt to him was the real crux.

Mu Boxiu, who had just been in hysterics, abruptly shut his mouth and fell silent.

Fu Shen said, "What, don't want to talk again?"

Blood was still flowing from the three arrows that had been nailed into his body. Mu Boxiu couldn't forget the iron-willed ruthlessness of killing without batting an eye that lay beneath Fu Shen's calm tone. These words made him shudder involuntarily. Survival instinct and reason grappled madly in his mind.

But this time Fu Shen didn't attack. Instead, propping up his head, he thoughtfully asked, "Come to think of it, I recall that at the outset, you rose to the rank of captain in the Baotao Guard based on your archery skills. So why were you later transferred to the Jinwu Guard?"

He had captured Mu Boxiu, so naturally he knew everything there was to know about his family and background. Not counting the Feilong Guard, among the sixteen guard teams of the North and South Imperial Guards, the hardest of all to get into was the Jinwu Guard, without exception. The Jinwu Guard was the head of the Ten South Yamen Guards, serving in His Majesty's presence, extremely lofty. Practically all those chosen for it were the sons of nobles and ministers who had rendered outstanding service. Mu Boxiu's birth wasn't high, and while his abilities were outstanding, becoming a general in the Baotao Guard was already a towering achievement for him. How had he gotten into the Jinwu Guard?

Mu Boxiu's silence continued, and so did Fu Shen's blind guesses. "Was it because someone promoted you? And it's out of gratitude that you're willing to stopper your mouth for his sake?"

Mu Boxiu seemed to have made up his mind to be a clamshell. But this reaction could in fact bear out the soundness of Fu Shen's guesses. He sneered coldly. "Profound affections?"

"There is something that General Mu perhaps doesn't know yet," Fu Shen said, and boasted shamelessly, "I have personally always been particular about trying the peaceful route before turning to violence. I never wantonly slaughter the innocent. Recently, while my people were investigating you, they were firmly convinced that they hadn't alerted you.

"Therefore, on the third day of the first month, why did you suddenly abandon your wife and family and run away in haste? And later, why did you not stint to use another's corpse to stand in for you, henceforth vanishing from this world without a trace?"

Mu Boxiu abruptly froze.

He asked suspiciously, "That wasn't you?"

Fu Shen said, "What are you hiding?"

Mu Boxiu was visibly shaken, but he still didn't dare to trust Fu Shen. Fu Shen considered it for a moment, then said, "You didn't stint to fake your death, which shows that that person was trying to kill you. But I had something to ask you, so before I saw you with my own eyes, my people certainly couldn't have attacked you."

He fixed his eyes on Mu Boxiu, the oppressive presence sharpened by many years of life on the battlefield like the toppling of mountains and upending of seas, pressing down so hard that Mu Boxiu couldn't lift his head. "Who is that person?"

Mu Boxiu wasn't the kind of idiot to be bought and then help count the money. Fu Shen wasn't bluffing. With a bit of thought, he could figure out the key to this.

"I advise you to get over it," Fu Shen said. "You've fallen into my hands, and you're going to die anyhow. You may as well take someone with you."

The sequence of events had already been laid out for the most part. Even if Mu Boxiu didn't say anything, if he only had time, these clues would be enough for Fu Shen to find the person behind him.

That he was still willing to waste his time here on Mu Boxiu showed that Mu Boxiu still had value. If he spoke well, he might be able to live a few more days.

Mu Boxiu sank once again into silence. This time Fu Shen didn't press him. Shortly, he at last abandoned resistance and spoke, at length and obscurely.

"I joined the Baotao Guard when I was seventeen and was promoted to captain at twenty-two, but because I had inadvertently offended a superior, I was repeatedly beaten down. I didn't advance again until I was thirty. It was that person who happened to discover that my archery was outstanding and made an exception to have me transferred to the Jinwu Guard. He viewed me as a trusted subordinate.

"The North and South Yamen have a history of not getting along, especially after Yan Xiaohan came to power. With the Feilong Guard growing strong, the North Yamen repressed the South Yamen. That person was unwilling to be neglected like that, so he devised ways and means to attract capable and talented people to enrich the Jinwu Guard and handle quite a number of disobedient ministers for His Majesty."

The three people listening with bated breath simultaneously felt a chill at heart.

The most rarefied of the sixteen imperial guards, the Jinwu Guard, which had always been seen as a place of "not seeking advancement, doing nothing and living in comfort," had without anyone noticing it silently transformed into the emperor's team of killers.

Mu Boxiu said, "In recent years, His Majesty has increasingly placed his trust in the Jinwu Guard. Last year, after the Battle of the Xiqiu Pass, he selected a few people from the Jinwu Guard and laid down the plan for the Qingsha Gap attack.

"The Qingsha Gap is located on the northern part of the shared border between Tongzhou and Yuanzhou. You had to pass through there while leading your people in escorting the Eastern Tartar diplomatic mission to the capital, so before you arrived, Yuanzhou's Beiyan Army sent people to check on the Qingsha Gap. The head of Yuanzhou's defenses is His Majesty's man. We mixed in among that team and laid gunpowder around the Qingsha Gap."

Fu Shen suddenly interrupted him. "Wait, where did you get your gunpowder?"

Gunpowder was restricted to military use and couldn't be privately traded among civilians, and every coming and going of gunpowder in the army had to be recorded. Yuanzhou was a place where the Beiyan Cavalry was stationed. Even if there was someone inside the army cooperating with someone on the outside, they still couldn't misappropriate gunpowder without anyone noticing. Moreover, Fu Shen had ordered the investigation of the flow of gunpowder in all the provinces near the Qingsha Gap after the fact and had found no abnormalities.

"From a 'wild channel,'" Mu Boxiu said. "There's a wild channel between Tongzhou's defense force and horse thieves on the border. The Tongzhou forces privately steal and sell gunpowder to the horse thieves. Their gunpowder logs are entirely fake. We dressed up as Eastern Tartars and bought the gunpowder from the horse thieves."

Yuanzhou was under Fu Shen's direct command, and Tongzhou had Fu Shen's former subordinates. The mighty commander of the Beiyan Army hadn't died on the battlefield but had overturned his ship in a gutter, falling at the hands of his own people. Fu Shen's lungs nearly burst from anger. There was nowhere to vent his rage. From between his teeth, he squeezed out, "Those traitorous bastards!"

Xiao Xun asked in disbelief, "Are you saying that that Qi Jiangsheng is His Majesty's man?"

Among the generals under Fu Shen's command, Xiao Xun and Yu Qiaoting were responsible for the military affairs of Yanzhou's three passes, Yuan Huan defended the area of Xuanqing, and Qi Jiangsheng defended Yuanzhou; they were all his aides and trusted subordinates, his fellow officers, lifelong friends.

Yu Qiaoting quickly soothed him: "General, calm yourself."

Fu Shen ignored him. He calmed his emotions and, grim-faced, said, "Continue."

Mu Boxiu said, "According to the plan, two people were responsible for igniting the fuse. I was keeping watch from above. If you weren't stopped by the falling rocks, it was up to me to add an arrow. No matter what, we couldn't let you leave the Qingsha Gap alive.

"But your fate is made of sterner stuff than the rocks. All of that, and you still didn't die. Not only that, you came back alive.

"I was afraid that your investigation would find me and spent every day with my heart in my throat. At last, late at night on the second of the first month, someone broke into my home and tried to kill me. My wife had just happened to take our children to visit her parents that day, so I was home alone. I injured that person. I thought that everything had been exposed, so that very night, I gathered up my valuables and fled the capital.

"When I had reached Dongwang Village, I became aware that someone had been following me all along, so I stole a corpse from a coffin house, put my clothes on him and deliberately left behind a jade thumb ring that never leaves me. I cut off his head, then tossed the headless corpse down a dry well. That person's head I buried in the forest behind Dongwang Village. By this point it must have rotted to nothing but bone. This way, if someone found that corpse, the person hunting me would know that I was already dead."

After faking his death, Mu Boxiu had wanted to keep running south, not expecting that before he could even leave the county seat, he would be captured and brought back by the Beiyan Cavalrymen, who had been following him for days.

Once the sequence of cause and effect was put together, it did in fact align perfectly with all the facts he knew, but there was still something Fu Shen couldn't work out: if that person had wanted to kill Mu Boxiu in order to silence him, why hadn't he done it right after the ambush at the Qingsha Gap and instead dragged it out this long? Or perhaps he hadn't originally been planning to silence him—so what was it that had made him feel threatened and forced him to abandon an instrument to protect the commander?

Or perhaps Fu Shen and the Jinwu Guard weren't the only two parties involved, and there was someone else who wanted to kill Mu Boxiu? Apart from them, the person who had sent Fu Shen the crossbow bolt also knew the truth.

How many powers had this pool of murky water pulled in?

Due to excessive blood loss, Mu Boxiu's breathing was growing weaker and weaker. He had probably already foreseen that the final result would be his death. Now he had calmed down. He said to Fu Shen, "The person I'm speaking of ought to be very familiar to General Fu.

"The commander of the Left Jinwu Guard, Yi Siming."

Fu Shen said, "There's no need to say it. I've already guessed."

The good friend of his youth, the loyal brother who had willingly run a risk to make arrangements for the Jin family survivors in his place, had in the end become a manipulator devoted to plotting his death from behind the scenes.

The noble young lord with eyes growing at the top of his head, who had been full of scorn for the court's lackey, for the sake of keeping back the Northern Yamen Imperial Guard, had turned the Jinwu Guard into murderers with less bottom line than even the Feilong Guard.

Fu Shen didn't know how he ought to appraise Yi Siming. His feelings weren't even as intense as when he had heard of the Tongzhou forces' falsified ledgers. He could no longer remember what encounters he'd had with Yi Siming in recent years.

Youthful friendships were as transient as morning dew. When the sun rose, they would disappear. Just like people in the end would all change into something different from what they had been.

It was just that some people still showed the outlines of their past selves, while some people's faces had changed altogether.

Worldly events were inconstant; the will of heaven was unfathomable.

Fu Shen indicated for Xiao Xun to push him out. Extorting a confession was also exhausting work. He needed time to slowly digest these truths. On hearing him leave, Mu Boxiu didn't speak to beg forgiveness from start to finish. In the prison, he closed his eyes, spent.

Bright daylight and fresh air poured in together, clearing the eyes and ears. Yu Qiaoting closed the stone door behind them. Fu Shen suddenly said, "Have Du Leng come take a look at his wounds. Don't let him die."

"Yes, sir," Yu Qiaoting agreed. "It's past midday, Lord Marquis. You should go eat something."

"I won't eat." Fu Shen waved a hand. "Has the bedroom been cleaned up? I want to sleep. Don't bother me unless something comes up."

It was clear to see that he was in a bad mood. At a time like this, no one dared to give counsel, and no one dared to disobey. Xiao Xun pushed Fu Shen into the bedroom. Yu Qiaoting stood under a tree in the courtyard and sighed. "Honestly… what is the world coming to?"

Xiao Xun silently patted him on the shoulder.

People who wandered often along the border between life and death all had an acute foreboding that was nearly intuition when it came to danger. Without prearrangement, Yu Qiaoting and Xiao Xun looked simultaneously at the horizon, where dense clouds were massing. Winter was ending and spring was coming. All living things would come back to life. There was faint thunder. But the future seemed to be shaded by a layer of dense foliage. This year would perhaps not be as calm and tranquil as certain people expected.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

FU SHEN HAD THOUGHT THAT YAN XIAOHAN WOULD BE BUSY FOR some time, not expecting him to appear at the manor's breakfast table on the third day. Fu Shen was for once surprised. He asked in astonishment, "Have you finished your business?"

"No." Yan Xiaohan boldly sat down across the table from him. "It's not my business anymore."

"Hm?" said Fu Shen.

Yan Xiaohan said in deadly earnest, "Nine days of wedding leave aren't meant to be used on trifles like work."

"That doesn't sound like something Lord Yan would say," Fu Shen said. "You Feilong Guards are the greatest experts at making trouble out of nothing. How could you let a ready-made egg with a crack in it fall without throwing yourselves at it?"

Yan Xiaohan didn't turn on him despite being ridiculed. He calmly said, "Haven't I come to give you a hug?"

Fu Shen was eating. Hearing this, he dropped his chopsticks on the spot. Yan Xiaohan, holding back laughter, put the chopsticks back into his hand with every appearance of indulgence. "Fine, fine, I'll stop talking, eat up."

Fu Shen pointed at him. "If we were in Yanzhou, you would have been dragged out and caned by now."

"Who chose the subject?" Yan Xiaohan knew this was only bluster on his part and took advantage all the more. "How unreasonable."

There really was nothing Fu Shen could do to him. All he could do was fiercely pick up a bun and stop his mouth.

When the meal was finished, Yan Xiaohan pushed him outside for a stroll to digest. Only then did the two of them once again bring up the subject of conversation at the table. "How is that case progressing? You must have turned up quite a lot over the last couple of days. Are you really not going to continue your investigation?"

Yan Xiaohan said, "When I said 'it's not my business,' I meant it in the literal sense. His Majesty has ordered that Shuntian Prefecture investigate alongside the Ministry of Justice and the Imperial Court of Judicial Review. The Jinwu Guard's business doesn't fall within the Feilong Guard's purview."

Fu Shen jeered, "Hey, after all that fuss, it turns out he kicked you out. And here you were swaggering around in front of me, hm?"

Yan Xiaohan was exasperated and amused. When he looked down, he just happened to meet Fu Shen's eyes.

He was standing high above, an indulgent smile rippling through his fine, deep eyes, his expression relaxed and natural. Per Fu Shen's observations, Yan Xiaohan's bearing in front of others was always tense; it wasn't that he was nervous, but rather that his words and actions were all overly precise. Even his skillfulness and nonchalance seemed to be planned, like a metal pitcher that didn't let a single drop leak out, all his truest and most natural reactions hidden under the thick metal casing.

But today, somehow, he had suddenly abandoned his pretenses and precautions. He had transformed into tranquility and mildness writ large. As he kept his eyes fixed on Fu Shen, Fu Shen actually felt his face heat slightly.

He acknowledged that the reason he had already been swayed was the abyss of many years between the two of them.

Fu Shen regarded himself as a man who wasn't superficial, but now it turned out that he could be dazzled by beauty.

Yan Xiaohan regarded the slowly reddening roots of his ears, gave a laugh, and reached out to pinch his earlobe. "Here I thought that you'd tricked me into your clutches and had enough of me. Lord Marquis, I hadn't thought that… you actually rather like me?"

Obviously, I've stared myself into a trance, what more indications that I like you do you want?

Fu Shen pinched his waist and spoke sternly with the force of justice. "Hands to yourself, stop groping. Talk about proper business."

Yan Xiaohan accordingly gave an "mhm," but he temporarily forgot himself in his complacency and didn't keep down the rising lilt in his voice. Fu Shen immediately found a flaw to nitpick. "Don't give me such a mocking 'mhm,' do it again."

Yan Xiaohan didn't say a word.

Jokes were jokes; the two of them returned to the main subject, which had run eight thousand li away. Fu Shen said, "Even if His Majesty won't let you take part, you must have investigated privately. What did you find?"

Yan Xiaohan made no comment. Instead, he asked, "Why are you so concerned about this case?"

"Curiosity," said Fu Shen.

Yan Xiaohan said, "You aren't the sort of person to stick your nose into other people's business. What is your connection to Mu Boxiu?"

Fu Shen narrowed his eyes. "Since you've asked this question, then I would also like to ask, is there any connection at all between you coming to see me today and the Mu Boxiu case?"

Yan Xiaohan regarded him quietly. The two of them faced each other in silence.

"Very well." Yan Xiaohan was the first to yield. "It's not that I suspect you. I just have some questions. When I sent people to investigate Mu Boxiu's background, I heard that someone had already come to investigate him a month ago. That's one. The headless male corpse found in Dongwang Village has already rotted. It can only be determined from his clothing and the objects found on him that he is Mu Boxiu. But the purpose of cutting off the head is to make it impossible to identify the corpse. So why did the killer leave a white jade thumb ring that could prove his identity? It's not rational. That's two.

"Mu Boxiu first held office in the Baotao Guard, and was later transferred to the Jinwu Guard. I recall that one day last year, you mentioned the Baotao Guard to me."

Fu Shen coldly said, "Lord Yan, have you cooked up so many false accusations that you've forgotten how to investigate a normal case?"

"You're not being rational, either," Yan Xiaohan continued. "Yu Qingheng is your trusted aide, yet at this critical moment, when the Beiyan Army has lost its mainstay, you've brought him back to the capital and have insisted on staying at this manor. Permit me to ask, the night we were wed, did all those Beiyan Cavalrymen you brought back with you stay the night at the Marquis Manor?"

Fu Shen didn't respond. It was unclear whether he was planning to admit his guilt and accept punishment or getting ready to kill the witness. He waited expressionlessly for Yan Xiaohan to continue.

"The final point is that His Majesty's attitude toward this case is also very strange." Yan Xiaohan paused, then said, "The Feilong Guard are the emperor's eyes and ears. Our investigative efficiency far surpasses that of the three judicial chief ministries. When an official of the court is killed, even if he is connected to the South Yamen, it doesn't make sense to ignore what's close at hand and seek a solution afar, cast away the Feilong Guard and have the Ministry of Justice and the Imperial Court of Judicial Review investigate the truth instead.

"The last time such a circumstance occurred, it was during the case of the Eastern Tartar diplomatic mission. Do you understand me?

"If there is a matter about which His Majesty already knows the truth, he won't use the Feilong Guard."

The atmosphere chilled abruptly to freezing point.

"Hey, at any rate you haven't stupidly disclosed information."

The frozen atmosphere suddenly melted like flowing water. Fu Shen leaned back easily in the wheelchair and gave a carefree laugh. "I've already warned you once, His Majesty doesn't trust you as much as you imagine. If you still won't be careful, the Feilong Guard will be disbanded sooner or later."

Yan Xiaohan frowned. "What do you mean?"

"You've guessed most of it," Fu Shen said. "The corpse in Dongwang Village was a blind put together by Mu Boxiu himself, in order to escape another group of people hunting him. As for my connection to him, that belongs to the Beiyan Army's internal secrets. I can't tell you, and it isn't connected to you.

"Continuing to investigate this case would be a waste of time. The only piece of information that, while not very important, is useful to you, I can tell you directly: look out for the Jinwu Guard. The Feilong Guard isn't the only sword in His Majesty's hand."

While neither the Feilong Guard nor the Jinwu Guard were much good, whether from private feeling or public interest, Fu Shen still wanted to lend Yan Xiaohan a hand. At any rate he knew Yan Xiaohan inside and out, whereas he truly didn't dare to trust in Yi Siming's character.

Yan Xiaohan was dumbfounded. Many thoughts flickered through his mind, which he raked together and sorted out one by one. As far as the survival of the Feilong Guard was concerned, the information revealed in Fu Shen's words did in fact pose a great problem.

After brief thought, he said solemnly to Fu Shen, "Thank you."

Yan Xiaohan really hadn't expected Fu Shen to give him a warning in a matter that concerned the Feilong Guard. In the Jin Yunfeng case, even though he had ultimately been lenient in the end, it still couldn't cover up the fact that he had stabbed Fu Shen in the back for the sake of getting ahead. In recent years, the Beiyan Cavalry had taken the strictest precautions against the Feilong Guard; he had always thought that Fu Shen particularly hated the Feilong Guard.

But just now, right in front of him, Fu Shen had made an exception.

He couldn't not know the weight of this hint of his; it practically amounted to strangling the Feilong Guard's archenemy in its place.

Yan Xiaohan's thoughts were complicated, but Fu Shen really seemed not to think much of it. He said indifferently, "No need for thanks, it was the slightest exertion."

That night, Yan Xiaohan stayed at the manor. Fu Shen had Xiao Xun find a guest room for him while he himself went to Du Leng to have his dressings changed. Who would have thought that when he returned to his room, he would find that a grown man had appeared there.

Fu Shen said, "What are you doing here?"

Yan Xiaohan said, "The guest room hasn't been cleaned up. I can't stay there."

"Nonsense," said Fu Shen. "I had them clean it up yesterday."

"I'm not staying in the guest room." Yan Xiaohan was supremely confident in his own justness. "You and I are married. Why can't we share a bed?"

"You think I wanted that?" Fu Shen said heartlessly. "Take it up with the one who arranged it."

But Yan Xiaohan seemed to have worked out where Fu Shen's bottom line lay and knew the limits within which mischief would be tolerated. Therefore, he gave a lengthy sigh and said, "Since ancient times the fates of beauties have been unhappy.

Earlier you couldn't take your eyes off me, and in the blink of an eye, the beauty fades and passion cools…"

Fu Shen's head began to hurt. "… Don't simper like a fox spirit at me, come over here and make the bed!"

It was easy to go from thrift to luxury, but hard to go from luxury to thrift. Before this, Fu Shen had been unwilling to face the fact that he had been pampered under Yan Xiaohan's care, but as soon as this person had arrived today, all the discomforts and jars he had felt since moving into the manor seemed to have been automatically cured at once.

Xiao Xun and Yu Qiaoting weren't so attentive in looking after him. After Fu Shen had finished interrogating Mu Boxiu that afternoon, he had sat idle in his room until late at night. By the time he had felt hungry and wanted to find something to fill up his stomach, when he had gone out the side, he had found that the food and drink placed in the corridor had gone cold long ago.

But during the time he had spent recuperating at Yan Manor, he practically hadn't remembered the word "hunger."

Something warm and smooth touched his lips. The aroma filled his nose. Then Yan Xiaohan's voice came from above his head: "Open your mouth."

Fu Shen took a bite from his hand. The freshly made pastry was fragrant and soft, melting in the mouth. He casually said, "It's a little sweet."

"I thought so, too." Yan Xiaohan put the plate on the table and poured him a cup of tea. "The cook has a heavy hand. I'll tell her to go easy on the sugar next time."

Fu Shen said, "Did you have the kitchen make it fresh just now? Didn't you eat your fill at dinner?"

Yan Xiaohan, familiar with the routine, had gone to the cabinet to find him an inner robe. Hearing these words, he responded without lifting his head. "Your dinner was too plain. You should eat something before you go to bed so you don't wake up hungry in the middle of the night."

Fu Shen awkwardly rubbed his nose.

"Come to think of it, that Army Doctor Du of yours, I think he isn't from the Central Plains?"

"Right," Fu Shen said, "he's from Xinan. What about it?"

Yan Xiaohan said, "I just went to look at the prescription he wrote for you. His methods are rather different from a Central Plains physician's. It looks to me like he's only concerned with repairing the bone and sinew and doesn't value building up overall health. Have Shen Yice check your pulse later and prescribe some strengthening medicine, or medicated foods... Taking medicine all the time damages your appetite. You have to eat well."

Ever since the two of them had had a fight over Fu Shen not taking his medicine, it had become Yan Xiaohan's job to supervise and urge him to do it. In this respect, Yan Xiaohan had an absolute right to speak; he basically had the final word. Without exaggeration, if Yan Xiaohan one day wanted to poison Fu Shen, Fu Shen might not even notice.

He gave instructions as he remembered them, and Fu Shen agreed now and then. He suddenly thought that it would be pretty good if this attentiveness continued. This room was a little big to begin with. With Yan Xiaohan here now, it was perfect.

A soft bundle of clothing fell onto his knees. Yan Xiaohan bent down and lifted him from the wheelchair. "Hold onto the clothes, let's go bathe."

The manor still had washtubs in it, and no screen. There was only a curtain in the middle as a partition. Fu Shen sat in the tub with his legs curled up. Suddenly, he heard Yan Xiaohan ask from the other side, "Who's been helping you bathe lately?"

Fu Shen answered readily, "Xiao Chongshan."

When Yan Xiaohan thought of how he had assisted this master in bathing, he belatedly felt acid rise in his stomach. Sourly, he muttered, "Why do you insist on living out here in the wilderness, where you can't even bathe in peace?"

Fu Shen was in fact very innocent. He normally had Xiao

Xun push his wheelchair to the bathing room, then got into the tub by himself by leaning against the wall. Only Yan Xiaohan could pick him up; even Yu Qiaoting had to keep a distance to avoid arousing suspicion. He hadn't realized that Yan Xiaohan was jealous. Uncomprehending, he said, "And what great family are you from, young mistress? So fussy."

Yan Xiaohan said nothing.

He gave up on judging everyone by his own low standards. After a while, resigning himself to his fate, he scooped Fu Shen up out of the water and put him back on the bed in the bedroom. "I'll go get the medicine. You wring out your hair… hm?"

Fu Shen had suddenly grabbed his collar and dragged Yan Xiaohan up in front of him. He extended a finger and prodded the corner of his lips upward.

"From now on, I'll only let you pick me up. If you're not here, I won't bathe. Stop being jealous, all right?"

Yan Xiaohan froze. He unconsciously took Fu Shen's hand in his own.

His eyes deep, he gazed fixedly at Fu Shen for a time, as if confirming something. Finally, he bent his head and lightly pressed his dry lips to his cheek. "All right… Mind what you say."

Fu Shen's heart instantly stopped, then went galloping full speed ahead. With a rumble, a sky full of fireworks burst.

As Yan Xiaohan was about to straighten up and leave, Fu Shen swiftly reached out to hold the back of his neck and pulled him back into his arms.

The two of them embraced, pressed neck to neck. The unprecedented closeness brought with it the utmost warmth and elation. He had thought before that he had only been moved a tiny bit, but it turned out that without him knowing it, so much had accumulated bit by bit.

Irresistible emotion was the matter of only an instant. As he had kissed him, countless possible reactions Fu Shen might have had flashed through Yan Xiaohan's mind; but the only thing he hadn't expected was the present situation.

He heard Fu Shen's smiling voice against his temple. It seemed to come from his nose, low and hoarse, and with an unspeakable softness and sweetness.

"Don't run off. That was a good kiss just now. How about another?"

CHAPTER THIRTY

THERE WERE SOME PEOPLE WHO SEEMED GRAND AS ANYTHING ON the surface, with an aggressive manner, but whose lips when kissed in reality were as soft as freshly steamed buns in the morning.

Fu Shen's countenance was in fact fine, but due to his temperament, he was most of the time stern and forbidding, as well as a skilled hand at mockery. Yan Xiaohan often thought that he was "sharp-tongued" in all senses of the word, that trifling with him would lead to a mouthful of blood.

But now Fu Shen was leaning back against the headboard, his head tilted back slightly, all his grandeur restrained, like some kind of indolent wild beast whose fur had been smoothed. He even still had one hand hooked around Yan Xiaohan's neck.

He had just bathed. His lips were slightly dry from the hot steam. When kissed, they were warm and soft.

Yan Xiaohan kept himself under control, hesitantly touching his dry lips, lightly pressing against them, feeling that he was standing at the edge of a cliff, probing, constantly admonishing himself that he must not jump while unable to resist the desire to stick his head out to look. Ultimately, he couldn't defeat the lure of instinct. The tip of his tongue gently and quickly caught Fu Shen's upper lip—

The hand on the back of his neck instantly clutched him with enough strength to strangle him to death.

As expected, he had been in too much of a hurry. He suppressed his seething emotions, closed his eyes, and thought that tonight he had had too many moments of irresistible emotion.

Once the shock had retreated, Fu Shen sheepishly let go and rubbed the place where his fingers had squeezed red spots. "... Sorry."

Yan Xiaohan gave a soft laugh. "Yes, I can tell."

Fu Shen had no answer to this.

Yan Xiaohan bent his head and kissed the tip of his nose. "I'll go get the medicine. You settle down. Such strength... How am I going to make any progress in the future?"

Fu Shen pushed him off the bed. "To hell with your progress. As I see it, you'll be climbing the walls if you're not beaten three times a day."

In the middle of the night came a dim roll of thunder. Yan Xiaohan woke from dreams. Before he could open his eyes, he smelled the scent of rain coming in through the window.

Only after that did he hear the fine, close-knit sound of rain hitting the eaves.

The first rain of spring had come at last. Yan Xiaohan, still not very awake, rolled over and felt the other side of the bed with his eyes closed. His palm fell on the humped silk quilt beside him; he patted it a couple times.

Fu Shen wasn't sleeping deeply. On rainy days, all the cracks in his bones ached. He was woken again and again by pain. Feeling Yan Xiaohan's movement, he gave a murky "hm?"

"Do your legs hurt?" The person beside him sleepily wrapped his arms around his waist. Right after waking up, there was a trace of a low, soft, tender nasal tone. "It's raining outside."

Fu Shen groaned softly. "A little. It's fine..."

Yan Xiaohan propped himself up in bed. "I'll go find a hot water bottle."

"No need." Fu Shen reached out to pull him back and only caught his loose hair, which wound smoothly around his fingers like silk. "Don't mess around, go back to sleep."

Yan Xiaohan leaned back slightly from his tug and had no choice but to lie back down. He moved aside the quilt and wrapped Fu Shen up, forcing his way into his bedding. Fu Shen must not have been very awake. Unexpectedly, he didn't turn nasty, only pushed lightly at his shoulder. "What are you doing?"

"Getting closer to you." Yan Xiaohan spread his arms and hugged him, his long legs warm with body heat pressing against his ice-cold calves, closely embracing him in an overly intimate posture. "Enough, sleep."

After a series of rustling sounds, body heat passed through the ice-cold bedding and gradually enveloped him. Fu Shen thought this posture was too restrictive and kept wanting to flex his arms and legs. But somehow, dim drowsiness overtook him in the once again quiet night and warmth. The places that usually ached were still aching, but it was as if there was a gentle barrier separating him from the sensation.

He leaned against the hollow of Yan Xiaohan's neck and fell deeply asleep.

The next morning when the sun rose, the mountain rain was still drizzling. Fu Shen's regimen had been influenced by months of convalescent life. He woke late in the morning, and it was overcast and raining outside, so he was even more drowsy, not opening his eyes.

The bed beside him was empty. The light outside the window was dim, and the room was damp and chilly, but inside the bedding, it was dry and warm. He moved his legs and felt the warm little hot water bottle that had been placed next to them.

Most likely it was Yan Xiaohan who had gotten it for him after getting up in the morning. Memories appeared in Fu Shen's mind. He recalled last night's fumbling and tenderness, enough to make a person's ears heat up; he had even let himself sleep half the night being hugged.

He silently savored the feeling of the kiss, rubbed his faintly aching knees, and thought regretfully, "Truly I'm a paragon of virtue."

Yan Xiaohan, opening the door and coming in, suddenly felt a chill run up his spine.

He automatically looked back, found nothing unusual behind him, and suppressed his doubts and went in. Toward the big bed with its tightly drawn bed curtains, he said, "Jingyuan, time to get up."

Fu Shen lazily pushed aside the curtains, indicating that he was already awake.

Yan Xiaohan had to wake up early every morning to stand his shift at the palace. It was already habit for him. Even on a day off he wouldn't sleep in. He seemed much more vigorous than Fu Shen, lying in bed like a good-for-nothing. He walked over and hung the bed curtains over the curtain hooks on either side, turned, and sat on the bed. "It's still raining. Does anything hurt?"

Fu Shen sometimes thought that Yan Xiaohan was overly careful of him, as if he wasn't a tough and thick-skinned grown man but a porcelain doll that would fall and break at a single breeze. Having lived this long, of course he had been injured many times. Neither Du Leng nor Yu Qiaoting thought that his leg wounds required particular care on a rainy day. For them, even death was an ordinary business. When it came to mere injury and illness, why mention them? Why worry about them?

But even a stone would warm up if held in both hands.

Fu Shen, saying "I'm fine," reached out his arms to pull Yan Xiaohan down and press him to the bed. Unexpectedly, Yan Xiaohan's seat was particularly firm; it was Fu Shen who was rolled from the inner portion of the bed to the outer portion to lean against his legs limply, like a boneless cat. Yan Xiaohan even took this as him throwing himself into his arms. He put an arm around his shoulders and, smiling, said, "You're already awake. Still don't want to get up?"

"I'm feeling lazy. I don't want to move," Fu Shen said with an old and decrepit sigh. "A man can't refuse to give in to old age."

"You're being too modest." Yan Xiaohan dipped his head and drew close to his ear. Bantering, he said, "The Lord Marquis is vigorous as a dragon and fierce as a tiger. Last night you held on to me and wouldn't let go. Have you forgotten?"

Fu Shen finally realized that there was something wrong here. With the two of them cuddling like this, one lying down and one sitting, however you looked at it, it seemed that there was an afterglow flavor to it—and that he had been the one to be ravished!

Forget being a fucking paragon of virtue! He ought to have screwed this scoundrel there and then last night!

He pinched Yan Xiaohan's waist very flirtatiously and said with a false smile, "Not to worry, as long as you're devoted to me heart and soul, I will guarantee that you will benefit immensely in the days to come… Yan Menggui!"

With one arm around his shoulders and one supporting his legs, Yan Xiaohan had without warning lifted him out of the bedding. Suddenly hanging in the air, Fu Shen was startled. Then Yan Xiaohan put him down on his lap, and an outer robe hit him full in the face.

Through the soft silk, a fleeting kiss seemed to fall on his lips, so gentle it was like an illusion.

Yan Xiaohan said, "Of course I am devoted heart and soul to the Lord Marquis."

Life in the mountains was timeless. Yan Xiaohan joined the Marquis of Jingning, who had embarked ahead of schedule on retired life, in idly frittering several days away at the manor. Yu Qiaoting privately whispered to Xiao Xun that Fu Shen's temper had improved by leaps and bounds; after learning such an upsetting truth, he and that Yan were joined at the hip every day—

that Imperial Investigator of the Feilong Guard couldn't be a thousand-year-old fox that had cultivated a human form, could he?

He wasn't the only one thinking this; the Feilong Guard in the capital all had a question on this subject.

What fox spirit had stolen away their Imperial Investigator's soul? They hadn't seen a trace of him in days.

When Shen Yice had come on orders to examine Fu Shen and to convey his colleagues' longing for Lord Yan while he was at it, that virtuous couple was bustling around in the manor's courtyard salting duck eggs.

Beside a small stone table in the courtyard was a basket of white salted duck eggs, washed clean. Yan Xiaohan and Fu Shen sat across from each other, one putting duck eggs in liquor to soak, the other responsible for rolling them in salt and placing them in a jar.

The flower beds in the courtyard had been neatly ploughed. Planted there were freshly sprouted spring onions and greens, with a big trellis of wisteria next to them, its mass of flowers like a waterfall. Beneath the trellis, chickens and ducks were milling around, clucking and quacking. The two people had their hands busy and idly exchanged remarks from time to time. Shen Yice stood there and watched as a duck trampled between their Imperial Investigator's feet. Yan Xiaohan meanwhile was ridiculing Fu Shen: "The ancients say that it's an eyesore to plant vegetables in the orchard and raise chicken and ducks under flower trellises. This courtyard of yours is all taken up."

Fu Shen, not lifting his head, shot back sarcastically, "Isn't there a lame general who's even more of an eyesore who you've taken all for yourself?"

Yan Xiaohan immediately shut his mouth, but the corners of his lips stuck up suspiciously.

Doctor Shen thought numbly, *I seem to be a little superfluous.*

"Jizhi, you're here." Yan Xiaohan was the first to notice him. He put down the work at hand and stood to welcome him, his manner natural and smooth, as if he didn't think there was anything wrong with two important court ministers who could overturn the world with a wave of the hand salting duck eggs in joy and harmony.

"Your Honor, Lord Marquis." Shen Yice saluted both of them and couldn't resist asking, "What's going...?"

Fu Shen said with a candid smile, "A little hobby. Mr. Shen must think it funny."

Shen Yice quickly said, "Certainly not, certainly not."

Could it be that it was as the rumors in the outside world said, that the Marquis of Jingning had been wounded to the heart by His Majesty arranging this marriage, that his temperament had altered and he was planning to doff his armor and return to the land?

Yan Xiaohan washed the salt off his hands. As he wiped them, he asked Shen Yice, "What fresh news from the capital?"

"That is precisely why I have come," Shen Yice said. "Another Jinwu Guard has died. His sudden death took place last night at Cuijin Pavilion in the east of the city. It was reported this morning. This case has disturbed the emperor. His Majesty commands you to return to the capital with all haste. All authority in this case has been given to the Feilong Guard."

Yan Xiaohan automatically exchanged a look with Fu Shen. Fu Shen shook his head very slightly, indicating that this had nothing to do with him.

Yan Xiaohan pondered briefly, then said not at all sincerely, smiling, "All right. How very peculiar. Why has the Jinwu Guard been having such bad luck lately? An unlucky year for them?"

Before, he hadn't been allowed to get involved, but this time the problem was bigger; the South Yamen could no longer contain it, and they'd had to go back to ask the Feilong Guard. Shen Yice thought that Yan Xiaohan might have been holding back rage, making his mockery especially obvious. Fu Shen said evenly, "That being the case, I won't linger, either. Make sure to be careful."

The two of them seemed to have something more to say to each other. They returned indoors together. Shen Yice sat in the courtyard, aimlessly running his eyes over the chickens and ducks all over the ground. Suddenly, the tips of his ears moved. He turned his head doubtfully.

The bedroom window hadn't been locked, only closed. Perhaps it was his mistaken impression, but he thought he had just heard a dull groan, soft and hoarse, almost a moan.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

IN FRONT OF YANGXIN HALL, YAN XIAOHAN BRUSHED SHOULDERS with the Jinwu Guard's General Yi Siming, who had just left the hall.

With one Jinwu Guard dying after another, as their superior, Yi Siming could hardly avoid censure. Even more wretchedly, the trust he had struggled to build up in the emperor's heart had taken a nosedive. After all, the Jinwu Guard's experience was scant, and their service record shallow. The emperor was willing to use them to kill chickens, but when it came time for the cows to be butchered, his first thought would still be of the Feilong Guard.

For a subject, the most frightening thing wasn't being greedy, and it wasn't being crafty; it was being "not much use."

Yan Xiaohan had just been warned by Fu Shen and so was particularly watchful. He hadn't seen Yi Siming for some time; at a glance, he hardly recognized him. His face was ashen pale, his eyes sunken in, his expression haggard and sinister. When he met your eyes, his stare was fixed, oddly horrifying.

Yan Xiaohan remembered they were the same age, but with the two of them standing next to each other, the difference between them was more than colossal.

"General Yi."

However much the North and South Imperial Guards didn't get along, when their two superior officers met in the street, they still had to exchange greetings. Yan Xiaohan cupped his hands in a salute, but Yi Siming didn't return it, and he didn't speak, either, only stared somberly at him for a while, then turned and left.

Yan Xiaohan didn't speak another word.

The eunuch who had come to lead him into the palace was the recently favored Eunuch Liu Ji. Seeing the situation, he quickly smoothed things over, saying, "With such a disturbance, His Majesty is enraged, and General Yi must be fretting awfully. That is why he hasn't been very polite. Be magnanimous, Your Honor. The responsibility of finding the killer and investigating the truth all rests on your shoulders."

Tian Tong, who had originally waited personally upon the emperor, had been kicked out under some pretext of Yan Xiaohan's. Now, having stepped on Tian Tong to reach the emperor's presence, Liu Ji knew to whom he owed his rise and was therefore especially polite to Yan Xiaohan.

Watching the young Imperial Investigator of the Feilong Guard walk into Yangxin Hall with steady steps, he thought that Duan Linglong had once ruled supreme in the palace, and Yan Xiaohan, being his adopted son, had been promoted every step of the way ever since entering the palace, the imperial favor bestowed on him unwaning. Despite this being the emperor's position, that idiot Tian Tong, overestimating his own strength, had still tried to challenge him. Wasn't this like an old man hanging himself because he thought he had lived too long?

And today there was General Yi Siming of the Jinwu Guard, with his face as stiff as a coffin board. It was clear at a glance that he was seething with jealousy, his heart haughtier than heaven and his fate more delicate than paper.

Emperor Yuantai's complexion looked bad. Probably it was because he was getting old and had too many irritations on his mind besides; his face looked waxen, with flabby pouches under his eyes. Yan Xiaohan bowed, and the emperor, his eyelids drooping, flatly asked, “Do you know all about it?”

Yan Xiaohan said, “I have already ordered my men to assemble a dossier and question the family and the witnesses on the scene. We will make every effort to find the truth, arrest the killer, and solve the case with all haste. Please set your mind at ease, Your Majesty.”

Emperor Yuantai did not speak for a long time. After that lengthy silence, he suddenly sighed.

“After all, it is better to let you spare Us worry than to have outsiders take care of business.” It was as if he had let out a tightly held breath. There was actually a hint of relenting in Emperor Yuantai’s tone. “Menggui, you have been put to great inconvenience in recent matters.”

Yan Xiaohan quickly said, “Not at all. It is all within the scope of my duty. Your Majesty overstates the case.”

In fact, he couldn’t quite work out what matter Emperor Yuantai was speaking of, but self-effacing modesty was never wrong. Emperor Yuantai pondered briefly, then said questioningly, “They say that Fu Shen isn’t in the capital?”

Yan Xiaohan said, “Your Majesty, the Marquis of Jingning is unwilling to occupy my humble manor. The day after the wedding, he removed to a villa outside the city. I thought that living apart so soon after being married did not conform with etiquette and would seem to be letting down Your Majesty’s expectations. Therefore I have spent these last days at the villa.”

“You have done well,” Emperor Yuantai praised him, then gave another feeling sigh and said, “Fu Shen… It’s no wonder he is unwilling to remain in the capital.”

An iron-willed general whose future prospects he had destroyed, whom he had forced into marrying a man. It would have been strange if Fu Shen had been willing to remain in a place like the capital, where his sore spot would be touched.

Yan Xiaohan, observing his words and expressions, thought he had understood some of Emperor Yuantai's state of mind.

Emperor Yuantai asked, "Before you returned, what was Fu Shen doing?"

Awkwardly, Yan Xiaohan said, "Well..."

"What's wrong?" said Emperor Yuantai. "You may speak openly."

Yan Xiaohan was strangely silent for a while, wishing to speak then holding back. Finally, his expression embarrassed, he said, "The Marquis of Jingning needs to convalesce. He fritters his time away. Currently he is planting vegetables and raising chickens and ducks in the manor, and also—"

Emperor Yuantai stared. "Also what?"

Yan Xiaohan gave a dry cough. As if it were too embarrassing to speak of, he said, "Salting duck eggs."

That gave Emperor Yuantai pause.

"Salting duck eggs?" Emperor Yuantai was incredulous. "W-why should he have suddenly thought of that?"

A gentleman keeps clear of the kitchen, a noble doesn't wash his own clothes—these were tasks for cooks and servants. A pampered young lordling with a great estate like Fu Shen very likely hadn't even set foot in a kitchen at his age. Why would he suddenly come up with this bizarre notion of salting duck eggs?

Even if he turned out to be a virtuoso at egg-salting, they would still only be salted duck eggs. What if it got out and he became known as the "Salted Egg General?" Wouldn't that be humiliating?!

Yan Xiaohan gave the whole thing up as a loss and went all in. "The manor's cook is from Jiangnan. The Marquis of Jingning grew up in the north and didn't know that each and every Jiangnan salted duck egg produces oil, and it all comes out in the salting process.

"According to the Marquis of Jingning, while he was in the army, the majority of the salted duck eggs he ate were bitter or smelled bad, and in every ten, half had no oil. He thought that all the salted duck eggs in the world were like that… Only now has he learned that the salting method in the south is different, so naturally he wanted to try for himself."

At first Emperor Yuantai thought it was funny, but when he heard the part about the army, his smile faded. At last, he remained in complete silence, a little unhappy and almost imperceptibly remorseful.

Yan Xiaohan, seeing that he didn't speak and seemed to be lost in thought, softly said, "Your Majesty?"

Emperor Yuantai closed his eyes slightly and whispered, "The Marquis of Jingning, Fu Jingyuan…"

When he had watched the teenage general retreat into the distance from Golden Terrace, how similar had his feelings been to what they were now. But no one had thought that a day would come when this pair of sovereign and subject would come to this pass.

Since that departure, he hadn't looked back.

At last, Emperor Yuantai said, "In a while, when it is time for the feast for the Vast Longevity Festival[1], have him return."

Yan Xiaohan lowered his eyes, hiding the flash of ridicule that had gone through them, and respectfully said, "Thank you for your great kindness, Your Majesty."

"If there's nothing else, you may withdraw."

Yan Xiaohan bowed again and was just about to withdraw when, unexpectedly, Emperor Yuantai suddenly called him back. Out of nowhere, he asked, "Fu Shen's salted duck eggs… how are they?"

Yan Xiaohan halted. He considered briefly, then answered, "I will not conceal from Your Majesty that, in my humble opinion, they're no good at all."

Emperor Yuantai sat up straight. "Hm? Go on."

"The Marquis of Jingning's grip is too strong," Yan Xiaohan said candidly. "From one basket of duck eggs, before the jar had even been sealed, he had already cracked two of them."

Emperor Yuantai finally laughed. Yan Xiaohan bowed and left the hall.

A warm spring breeze blew by, but chills were running along his back. Yan Xiaohan walked along on the gray tiled palace walkway. The more he thought about it, the more mockery he felt, until finally he couldn't even resist laughing.

The palace maids and eunuchs passing by him saw that he seemed to be deranged, laughing fit to chill a person to the bone, and kept far away from him in fear, not daring to appear in front of him, afraid lest they end up in trouble with him.

Emperor Yuantai really was getting old. He had even learned to think fondly of the past.

The Jinwu Guard had been unable to clean up the mess it had made, so Yan Xiaohan had been brought back. Now Emperor Yuantai finally knew who was a truly capable minister. While thinking that he had been putting Yan Xiaohan to great inconvenience, he had remembered Fu Shen, then been put off by Yan Xiaohan's words. In Emperor Yuantai's iron-forged imperial heart, a tiny bit of remorse had finally been born.

Perhaps because his impression of Fu Shen was that he was always stubborn, very rarely retreating voluntarily, Fu Shen leaving the capital to peacefully convalesce, even retiring to the countryside to salt duck eggs, looked like rare good sense in Emperor Yuantai's eyes. And precisely because of this, he could at last look down pityingly from on high at this crippled general who had doffed his armor, and had even developed compassion, making him grant an unusual favor, giving Fu Shen a chance to return to the capital.

It's just screamingly funny, Yan Xiaohan thought heretically. *Why don't you think about who forced him into this?*

But an emperor was after all an emperor. Remorse lasted only for a brief span, but dread could never be set aside. Yan Xiaohan knew that he couldn't stand to see Fu Shen doing well; he couldn't even take him being extraordinarily gifted at salting duck eggs.

Luckily, he hadn't had to yield much. He had only had to tell him that the salted duck egg were unsuccessful, and Emperor Yuantai would think he had satisfied his delusions and misgivings—after all was said and done, Fu Shen was an ordinary man; so what if he was skilled at commanding troops and waging war? Once off the battlefield, he couldn't even salt a duck egg properly.

So much achieved with so little effort. The logic was stupid enough to make you laugh. But precisely this bit of abnormal satisfaction was enough to pry open a crack in the iron fetters restraining Fu Shen.

In a certain sense, Yan Xiaohan and Fu Shen really were a match made in heaven. They were both adroit; the two of them had skills for surviving in desperate straits, sailing against the wind and turning the tables, that were simply identical.

Once out the palace gates, he walked north a few steps, and the Feilong Guard depot was close at hand. Yan Xiaohan restrained his smile, opened the door, and went in. The people sitting in a circle inside stood up all at once as though they had seen some kind of rare treasure. "Your Honor!"

"Your Honor, you're back!"

"Thank heaven and earth!"

"Hm?" said Yan Xiaohan doubtfully. "What's to be thankful for?"

The youngest member of the Feilong Guard, Tang Guo, responsible for the North Prison's interrogation office, was an honest and responsible child. He sold his colleagues out at once without hesitation. "They've been saying that the reason you haven't been here all this time is that you were captured by a monster who's been sucking your essence. Now that you've come back safe and sound, of course they have to thank heaven for its blessings and protection."

Having said this, he even piously chanted a "Namo Amitabha."

Yan Xiaohan didn't respond.

There was dead silence in the courtyard. Wei Xuzhou and the others, brutally sold out, automatically lined up along the wall looking dejected, silent as cicadas in winter.

Lord Yan was so angry he gave a series of grim laughs. "That's just great. I've poured the wine from my wedding feast into the bellies of dogs. Is that how you all talk about me behind my back? I'm going to count to three. You all know what to do."

After the count of three, all the Feilong Guards in the courtyard had climbed the wall in unison and, like a line of big monkeys, were squatting on the narrow top of the wall, looking miserable.

This was a cheap ploy Yan Xiaohan had come up with after taking office as the Imperial Investigator. The Feilong Guard weren't the only official branch to the north; the six corps of the Yamen were all along one street. If anyone was passing by, they had but to look up to see the generals hanging off the wall and fluttering in the wind.

From across the wall, the sounds of laughter of those pleased at their misfortune could be heard. "Hey, Lao-Wei, have you all been hung up on the wall by your Imperial Investigator again?"

Tang Guo, who had sold out his colleagues, raised his head and observed for a while. He turned and was about to go inside when he saw that Yan Xiaohan was still standing there. "Xiao Tang, where are you going?"

Tang Guo met his gaze innocently.

Yan Xiaohan said, "You had a part in it, too. Get up there."

Tang Guo couldn't understand this at all. Aggrieved, he asked, "Why?"

"To teach you a lesson," Yan Xiaohan said ruthlessly. "Don't believe everything people say to you, or one of these days you'll be taken in so far there won't even be a speck of bone left of you."

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1. Name given to the Emperor's birthday, which was celebrated as a national holiday.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

"HAS THE BODY BEEN EXAMINED? WHAT DOES THE CORONER say?"

The body had been parked in the cellar of the North Prison. Because it was a rather warm day, it had been preserved with ice. Yan Xiaohan, not afraid of getting dirty, personally examined it. The dead Jinwu guard was emaciated, his face bloodless, with black circles under his eyes; he didn't look like an imperial guard who drilled every day, but rather like a young lordling who was up partying every night and had ruined his health.

For some reason, Yan Xiaohan thought this appearance was familiar.

"What is the cause of death?"

Wei Xuzhou was standing far away. He said, "Acute attack of lost Yang. In other words, died in the saddle. He passed right on the spot. There was no saving him."

Yan Xiaohan spread open the corpse's hands. As expected, there were red rings on the palms, with red veins covering them, the circles closed: typical symptoms of dying in the saddle. He replaced the hands and asked, "Since the cause of death is evident, what else is there to investigate?"

Wei Xuzhou said with a bitter smile, "Your Honor, take another close look. Do you really not recognize this person?"

Yan Xiaohan scrutinized the corpse briefly with a great show of earnestness, then finally saw the light: "I was just thinking that he looked familiar. This wretched appearance of his, doesn't it look like Yi Siming?"

Wei Xuzhou said, "... No. Your Honor, this person is called Yang Hexuan. His father is Tangzhou's Military Commissioner Yang Xu. He is nephew to the empress, the crown prince's cousin. At any rate he counts as an imperial kinsman. Therefore, apart from our Feilong Guard, which Yamen would dare to take this case?"

As soon as he mentioned the crown prince, Yan Xiaohan remembered. "Oh, one of the Yangs. Isn't the Jiumen Guard's General Yang Sijing his brother?"

Wei Xuzhou said, "Precisely."

Yan Xiaohan gave a cold laugh and said nothing else. But Wei Xuzhou inexplicably felt a chill on his back from that laugh. He thought there was an ill wind in their Officer Yan's smile.

When the crown prince had advised Emperor Yuantai, he had recommended Yang Sijing, wishing for him to marry Fu Shen. Though Emperor Yuantai had ultimately turned this down, that didn't prevent Yan Xiaohan from chewing over this old jealousy. He didn't have the slightest favorable impression of the Yangs. Out of respect for the dead, Yan Xiaohan didn't say "He deserved it," but it would have been far too much to hope for him to investigate wholeheartedly.

Besides, the emperor's emphasis on this case came from the fact that two Jinwu Guards dying one after the other made one suspect a conspiracy aimed at the imperial guards. Yan Xiaohan knew that Mu Boxiu had been dealt with by Fu Shen, which had nothing to do with Yang Hexuan's death. He had also realized that there was nothing unusual about this case to begin with; they only had to put on an appearance of attaching importance to it out of respect for the empress and Yang Xu.

"Give me the transcripts of the witnesses' testimonies." Yan Xiaohan cast aside the handkerchief he had just used to cover his hand and turned to find water to wash his hands. As he walked, he said, "Everyone break it up. Tomorrow Wei-xiong and Jiang Shu will go to Cuijin Pavilion with me. Everyone else go about your business. A single case isn't worth us making a big fuss."

Wei Xuzhou admired Yan Xiaohan's attitude of regarding everything as unimportant. He was plainly very young and not of high birth, but apart from His Majesty, he had never bowed his head before anyone. Never mind the Yangs; Wei Xuzhou had never seen him care about any imperial kinsmen or officials military or civil.

When he reached the door to the cellar, Yan Xiaohan remembered something else. He looked back and instructed, "Keep your mouths shut about us going to Cuijin Pavilion tomorrow. Don't let it get out."

Wei Xuzhou startled, then caught up. His admiration for the Imperial Investigator developed a slight wobble.

But then, remembering "that gentleman's" great achievements, finding his conscience, he thought in self-consolation, *You can't call being dominated by one's wife being afraid.*

When mentioning the two most flourishing locations in the capital, one was Curio Lane, and the other was Gold Dust Den. Curio Lane referred to the East Market in the eastern part of the city. The traveling merchants from outside the capital congregated there, and there was all one could ask of rare treasures and overseas specialties. Gold Dust Den, meanwhile, indicated the red-light district of brothels, restaurants, and gambling houses in the west of the city. Cuijin Pavilion, where Yan Xiaohan and his subordinates were going, did business in Xinghua Alley in the western part of the city.

Looking around the capital, Cuijin Pavilion counted as one of the best-known brothels, but having been unfortunate enough to have a homicide case there, its customers had all gone elsewhere from fear of bad luck. Because of this, the courtyard was sparsely populated, its business far worse than before.

Yan Xiaohan and the other two were in plain clothes, not wanting to attract too much attention. Wei Xuzhou was a frequent customer here. The madam knew his face. As soon as he made himself known, she readily admitted them. Seeing this, Yan Xiaohan left him behind to question the madam and the prostitutes while he himself walked up the scarlet wooden steps to the third floor and opened a two-paneled door that had a paper seal stuck to it.

The arrangements inside the room had been preserved in their original condition. He took a handkerchief from his sleeve to cover his hand and inspected all the cups, plates, and pots on the table one by one, then pulled open all the small drawers of the dressing table, turning up all the aphrodisiac drugs stashed there. He tore off a strip of handkerchief to wrap them up, ready to be taken back and examined one by one.

Next to the dressing table was a small, low table with a gold-plated copper incense burner in the form of a Suanni. Up close, one could still smell faint remnants of incense. Yan Xiaohan bagged a bit of incense ash in paper and put it away, then lifted the cloth hanging beneath it. The bedding on the bed was in disorder, with even some personal objects of conjugal intimacy exposed. When Yan Xiaohan saw a pair of cotton socks on the bed that hadn't yet been put away, he was suddenly struck with a thought.

He crouched down and searched under the bed and on the floor. Not finding what he wanted, he stood up and went downstairs. Wei Xuzhou was just listening to the madam and the prostitute Qinzhen tearfully complaining, "... I don't know what happened, Young Master Yang had lost weight, but that just made him all the more vigorous, Shuxian-jiejie couldn't take it several times and nearly died. And I also..."

Seeing Yan Xiaohan coming downstairs, her cheeks turned scarlet. She couldn't resist hiding her face with her sleeve, too ashamed to keep talking.

Yan Xiaohan took no notice. He asked, "What are you talking about? Did you just say that Yang Hexuan was 'vigorous?' Did he often use aphrodisiacs?"

Qinzhen's voice was thin as a mosquito's whine. "Young Master Yang, he… he spent a lot of time in Xinghua Alley, ruined his health, so he was only average in that respect, he needed to take aphrodisiacs. But starting last year, he found some new prescription somewhere and became unusually powerful. I often told him that he shouldn't use such strong medicine, but he said he hadn't been taking medicine and told me not to make blind guesses…"

"Hadn't been taking medicine?" Wei Xuzhou was speechless. "Even dying in the saddle he still had to puff himself up. This Young Master Yang was pretty keen on saving face."

Yan Xiaohan asked thoughtfully, "Apart from Cuijin Pavilion, where else did Yang Hexuan go that night?"

Qinzhen said, "I heard that he first went to Baiying House, but their star, Miss Feiyan, wasn't there, and he found the one looking after him not to his satisfaction, so he came to Cuijin Pavilion."

Yan Xiaohan tossed the aphrodisiacs and incense ash wrapped in the handkerchief to Jiang Shu. "Go get an imperial physician to examine those, see whether they're poisonous." He turned to go out. "Wei-xiong, come to Baiying House with me."

Baiying House was in another alley, completely different from the unfrequented Cuijin Pavilion. As soon as they came close, they heard the singing of orioles and swallows, the music of woodwind and string. Gorgeously dressed young women were soliciting customers at the door. Seeing Wei Xuzhou, a regular customer, coming toward them following a handsome man they had never seen before, and not even dressed in uniform, they took it for granted that they had come in search of pleasure. They immediately brought all their coquetry and charm to bear, creeping toward them as softly as though boneless. "What a dashing gentleman. Would you be willing to honor us with your presence, step in and drink some wine?"

The scent of rouge and powder hit Yan Xiaohan in the face. There was a rebuke on the tip of his tongue, just about to leave his mouth, when all of a sudden a scalp-numbingly familiar voice came from behind—

"Hey, are you busy?"

Yan Xiaohan turned his head quickly. That person he had begun to long for unceasingly after a day's separation was sitting in a wheelchair, holding an unopened folding fan, tapping it rhythmically against his palm, calmly looking his way.

Xiao Xun's hand was on the hilt of his sword as he stood expressionlessly behind Fu Shen. Shen Yice looked like he had given up on life and was perhaps already reciting the incantation of reincarnation in his mind. Behind Yan Xiaohan, meanwhile, were the dumbfounded Wei Xuzhou and a row of open-chested, bare-backed orioles and swallows. The two groups met in such grand style at the door of the pleasure house.

Yan Xiaohan was open-mouthed and tongue-tied. He nearly blurted out a question, asking Fu Shen why he was here, then suddenly remembered that he himself had dispatched a servant to the manor in the mountains to tell Fu Shen to return to the capital to prepare to take part in the Vast Longevity Festival.

Fu Shen gave him a meaningful look. Written all over his face were the words, *You dare to go whoring behind my back?*

Yan Xiaohan's heart lurched. Immense will to live overpowered his reason. Not even caring that his subordinates and outsiders were present, he blurted out, "I'm being unjustly accused!"

There was silence.

This must be what was called retribution in this life.

With a fake smile, Fu Shen said, "I am an upright official with my head as high as the clear sky. How could I unjustly accuse you?"

As the two of them spoke, a tactless woman from the brothel came forward trying to clutch Yan Xiaohan's sleeve. With a simpering smile, she said, "What are you all standing around here for? Please come in, gentlemen."

Lord Yan must have used all the skill he had ever had in his life to dodge, narrowly managing to evade the young woman's outstretched hand amid the tightly-packed crowd. But before he could feel thoroughly relieved, he heard Fu Shen say, "Hey, this young lady isn't bad. Very pretty."

Yan Xiaohan's face instantly turned green. He glared at Fu Shen in disbelief.

Marquis Fu had an excellent name among the common people. He was far more welcome than Yan Xiaohan. And this young lady adored handsome young heroes; she had been in the crowd tossing flowers at him. She recognized Fu Shen at a glance and dropped Yan Xiaohan on the spot. Cooing, she threw herself toward him pitifully—

"However," Fu Shen said smiling, pressing the folding fan to her chest and keeping her at arm's length, "compared to my humble wife, she's still not as good."

This was a masterstroke, a complete turnaround. Everyone's heads turned in unison toward the "humble wife" in question.

Yan Xiaohan said nothing.

He had worked it out. This scoundrel knew everything, understood the situation with perfect clarity; he was just deliberately making sport of him for his own entertainment!

Lord Yan, having been made sport of, ground his teeth fiercely, a hundred and eight different things he could do to Fu Shen lining up in his mind.

"A misunderstanding! It's all a misunderstanding!" Not for nothing was Wei Xuzhou Yan Xiaohan's trusted right-hand man. He had finally realized that he shouldn't just be standing there watching the fun. He quickly produced his waist token and said loudly, "The Feilong Guard is investigating a case! Unconcerned persons keep out of the way!"

As soon as the words "Feilong guard" came up, the brothel's prostitutes instantly fell into chaos. The madam was scared into a scream. Everyone knelt en masse.

Yan Xiaohan quickly certified his innocence to Fu Shen. "Don't be angry, I really am just here to investigate a case!"

Fu Shen snorted. "I trust you wouldn't be interested in this bunch, with their mediocre rouge and vulgar powder. Get on with it, then, I'll be going."

He really was well acquainted with the way of "carrot and stick." With a few words, he had placated Yan Xiaohan. Fu Shen, having had enough sport, was just about to retire with merit when Yan Xiaohan, in full public view, grabbed him by the hand. His palm was scalding hot. Brooking no refusal, he said, "Lord Marquis, a word?"

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

"WHAT DO YOU WANT? IS THE FEILONG GUARD PLANNING TO kill and silence the witness after being caught entering a pleasure house?"

Fu Shen, pulled into a deserted little alley by him, wasn't worried. Like a lecher, he caught his chin with the folding fan. Yan Xiaohan allowed his flirtation. Staring at him, he said, "Forget the killing, but the silencing is a must."

Fu Shen asked with interest, "How are you planning to… hmph…"

Before he could finish, Yan Xiaohan had leaned down and stopped his mouth.

They were newlyweds and had been forced to part. Now that they had reunited unexpectedly, there were some amassed hidden feelings that couldn't be spoken, which could only be given vent through movement. This kiss was more lingering than the one at their parting, and it came with deliberate force. As if to get revenge for his earlier teasing, Yan Xiaohan bit Fu Shen's mouth roughly.

This bite hurt a little. Fu Shen clutched his collar and hissed in a gasp, but he didn't scold him. "Touchy. Not so hard, don't leave a mark…"

At his gasp, Yan Xiaohan himself was regretful. He put a hand on the back of Fu Shen's head and gently sucked at the place he had bitten. "Did it hurt?"

Fu Shen patted him on the back, indicating that it was fine, and he didn't forget to go on making fun of him. "Dallying in brothels behind my back. I haven't even had a go yet, and you're already acting wronged."

Yan Xiaohan half-knelt before him, a little lower than Fu Shen, and gathered both his hands in his own palms. "Are you jealous? Tell the truth."

Fu Shen sneered. "You think everyone is a jar of sour vinegar like you."

Yan Xiaohan said, "Are you really not jealous? What would you do if I really did go dallying in brothels?"

Fu Shen smiled slightly and, in a whisper, asked in turn, "Yan-xiong, do you think I can't hold a knife anymore?"

Yan Xiaohan didn't answer.

In fact, he ought to have expected it. With Fu Shen's intensity, if he met with any betrayal, the outcome would certainly be a clean cut, bringing everything to an end. Yan Xiaohan had already come to grief over this once. It was only that Fu Shen had still been young then, and still very softhearted. That was the only reason he'd had another chance to get close to him.

He pretended not to have heard Fu Shen's last sentence and tactfully changed the subject. "How did you end up here?"

Both of Fu Shen's hands were in his. He lowered his head to indicate for him to look at the fan in his lap. "There's a bamboo ware shop nearby that makes good folding fans. I had the owner make some fans last year and just remembered it, so I came to collect them on my way. I didn't expect such a coincidence."

While Fu Shen had long ago broken free of his luxurious youth, there was still a love of elegance in his bones. All the casual clothes and ornaments he wore at home were exquisite as anything. Most contemporaries liked fans with hardwood ribs, while the more extravagant ones liked to use ivory or ox horn for ribs. Fu Shen, however, was unusually fond of light and graceful bamboo fans. He didn't insist on spotted or fishpole bamboo; as long as the color was fresh and clear, he would like it.

Yan Xiaohan vaguely recalled that in previous years, when Fu Shen had occasionally returned to the capital and the two of them would sometimes meet in the street, Fu Shen had never been empty-handed.

Fu Shen said, "What about you? Didn't the death happen at Cuijin Pavilion? Why has your investigation brought you to Baiying House?"

Yan Xiaohan said, "That Jinwu Guard died in Cuijin Pavilion, but he had gone to Baiying House that night. He had something with him that wasn't found at Cuijin House. My guess is that he may have dropped it here."

"Dropped what?" Fu Shen followed up entirely automatically. Only once the words were spoken did he realize they were improper. "Can I ask? If you can't tell me, then take it that I didn't ask."

Yan Xiaohan squeezed his hands. Expression unwavering, he said, "Permit me to keep you guessing. It's not that I can't say, it's that I'll have to wait until we get home tonight to tell you." He looked all around and laughed ambiguously. "It wouldn't be very convenient to say it here."

Fu Shen couldn't understand his peculiar amusements. He thought to himself, *Are we really going to tell ghost stories?* Did Yan Xiaohan take him for a three-year-old child?

"All right." Resigning himself, he tapped Yan Xiaohan's palm. "There's something I think might be connected to this case. I heard Doctor Shen say that this Jinwu Guard died through an acute attack of lost Yang. When I was picking up my fans just now, I overheard the shopkeepers talking. I heard that from the start of the year, in just these two short months, many people have been carried out of the brothels in this area. Hasn't there been a decent number of people dying in the saddle lately?"

"I'm thinking along the same lines." Yan Xiaohan stood up and bent to kiss him on the temple. Quietly, he said, "Leave Shen Yice with me. I'll tell you the rest in detail when we get home."

Fu Shen, seeing that he understood the situation, nodded and said nothing further. Yan Xiaohan pushed him out of the alley and handed him over to Xiao Xun. When he turned and was about to leave, Fu Shen suddenly called him back. He raised his hand and tossed his folding fan to him.

When he drew back his hand, his sleeve described a full arc in the air, green robe contrasting with black hair. Even though he was forced to sit, he still had the limber grace of a eucalyptus tree facing the wind, leading countless orioles and swallows outside the building to crane their necks to catch a glimpse. Fu Shen seemed only to be casually delivering a little gift. He said carelessly, "For you. Take it to play with."

Yan Xiaohan watched him disappear at the end of the alley. His fingers twisted unconsciously, opening the completely unremarkable slim fan in his hand.

Black bamboo guards, bamboo palm sticks, heavy mica paper sprinkled with silver powder. On the front was a freehand brush drawing of the moon and a tower, but on the back were two lines of an ancient poem.

Could I but turn into the southwest wind,
pass away and live forever in my husband's heart.[1]

Wei Xuzhou leaned over uncouthly from behind and at a glance saw the two lines. He nearly started to chirp. "Look, everybody look, this is the bearing of a first wife..."

Yan Xiaohan fluidly closed the fan and poked him menacingly in the hollow of his shoulder. "There is currently no need for you to experience the bearing of a first wife. Enough nonsense, go investigate."

Though he said this, the smile on his face was like water filling a pitcher to the brim; it couldn't be hidden, and at the lightest touch, it would overflow.

Watching his airy gait as he walked away, Wei Xuzhou couldn't resist thinking to himself in bewilderment, *Are we sure His Majesty didn't arrange this marriage for him out of pity for his half lifetime of bachelorhood?*

Yan Xiaohan returned home in the evening, at which point Fu Shen and those who had accompanied him had already settled down at Yan Manor. A lamp was once again lit in the bedroom, which had been unoccupied for some time. Fu Shen sat beneath the lamp reading.

His features were relaxed. When concentrating, he lacked that cold, harsh oppressiveness. Even his stern expression no longer seemed so unreachably lofty; it only looked pleasing to the eye and mind.

His eyes were focused on the book. Someone else's were focused on him.

"If you keep looking, I'll have to charge a fee." Fu Shen put his book face down on the table and said with chill mockery, "Is this the best you can do? You're going to shave a layer off my face with your gaze. Didn't you look your fill at Baiying House today?"

"You keep saying you're not jealous, but you won't leave off the topic of Baiying House." Yan Xiaohan walked into the inner room, took off his outer robe, and put on ordinary house clothes. He sat across from Fu Shen and took the tea he offered him. "If you insist on making me speak directly, then all right. In fact, I didn't want to wheedle you with something like 'You're better-looking than them,' because I thought it would be an offense even to discuss those people in the same breath as you.

"In my heart, you are above all others. There is no one to compare with you." Yan Xiaohan drank a mouthful of tea and calmly said, "That's the truth, from the heart. I'm not joking."

The sudden confession startled Fu Shen.

"Yan-xiong?"

Yan Xiaohan sighed. He put down his tea, walked up in front of Fu Shen, and pulled him into his arms.

"Lord Marquis, I like you very much," he said. "This is the first time in my life I've cared for someone so much. There can't be the slightest misunderstanding between us. What happened seven years ago cannot happen again."

Fu Shen was silent for a long while, then at last slowly asked, "Since… since when?"

He had thought that it was a matter of familiarity breeding fondness, coming about because they had been living together, but it seemed from Yan Xiaohan's words that that wasn't the case—could it be that when he had only thought of him as a friend, Yan Xiaohan had already harbored errant thoughts toward him?

"Seven years ago," Yan Xiaohan said with a bitter smile. "But at the time… I was too full of myself."

Fu Shen forced down his shock. "Why?"

He had still been a child then!

"If you're willing to listen, I'll tell you little by little by and by." Yan Xiaohan carefully kissed his temple. "At any rate, you only need to understand that I won't go to anyone else behind your back."

"That's no good," Fu Shen said directly. "At least you have to say what you like about me, make me happy."

Yan Xiaohan gaped.

The atmosphere that had turned stagnant at the recounting of feelings was washed clean all at once. Yan Xiaohan couldn't resist burying his head against Fu Shen's shoulder and laughing. Fu Shen was a very powerful person in every respect, especially where emotions were concerned. Yan Xiaohan sometimes thought that he was struggling across a swaying single-plank bridge on the point of collapse, and every time he put a foot wrong and thought he was going to be dashed to pieces, he was firmly steadied from beneath by Fu Shen. Opening his eyes upon his lucky survival, he would discover that beneath the mountainous clouds and winding mist, the ground was actually at his feet.

He had always been the one to be pardoned.

In a voice so low it was only breath, Yan Xiaohan said into his ear, "From head to foot, all the places I've touched, all the places I haven't touched—I like it all."

At night, after the two of them had bathed and were lying side by side in bed fermenting sleepiness, Fu Shen suddenly remembered today's case. He poked Yan Xiaohan with his elbow. "You said today there was something you could only tell me when we got home. What was it?"

"Oh, you mean what I went to find." Yan Xiaohan rolled over to face him and put a hand on his waist. "It was boot padding.

"The deceased is named Yang Hexuan, a Jinwu Guard. Military officials often ride in their day-to-day lives and very rarely take sedans. But when riding a horse, there's nowhere to put things, so for small items or documents that they need to take with them, they usually keep them in their boot padding. Yang Hexuan's personal items were all collected, but I didn't find his boot padding. Cuijin Pavilion also didn't have it, so I went to Baiying House to look around. As expected, he had dropped it in the room he had been drinking in last night.

"His boot padding contained some debt slips, for about fifty liang, and a paper bag containing some remaining powder. I figure that was what we wanted to find. I have already handed it over to Shen Yice. Tomorrow we'll find out what it is."

Fu Shen said, "How can you be certain it was the contents of that bag that killed him?"

Yan Xiaohan said, "I questioned the prostitute who was with him that night at Cuijin Pavilion. The young woman said he had often used aphrodisiacs during sexual intercourse. Then, for reasons unknown, he suddenly recovered his vigor and moreover was more powerful than the average man. He even said he hadn't been taking medicine. It would be strange if he hadn't.

The brothel only has ordinary aphrodisiacs. For that kind of effect, it was most likely some powerful drug he furtively got in private from somewhere else."

"Is that all?" Fu Shen said dubiously after hearing him out. "Why did such trifles have to wait until we got home?"

With the conviction of rectitude on his side, Yan Xiaohan said, "Was I supposed to discuss aphrodisiacs and a man's ability to get it up in a rotten alley with you? These confidential matters between husband and wife should only be spoken of late at night in bed, right?"

Fu Shen was speechless.

Listening to all that talk about "aphrodisiacs" just now, he had been unflappable, without a single inward wave. The upshot was that as soon as Yan Xiaohan said this, he instantly felt a surge of hot blood to his underbelly and nearly stood up on the spot.

The hand on his waist suddenly tightened. He was pulled quilt and all toward Yan Xiaohan. That shameless scoundrel massaged his back over and over, huskily teasing, "Truly unfeeling..."

Through two layers of light, soft silk quilt, Fu Shen could still feel something prodding his leg. They were both men; of course he understood.

He made an awkward movement and was immediately held back by Yan Xiaohan. "Don't.

"Don't worry about it. It'll be fine in a little while." Yan Xiaohan stroked his spine reassuringly. "I won't touch you."

Fu Shen, hearing the words "I won't touch you," raised his eyebrows slightly.

He didn't move. After a while, when Yan Xiaohan's overly rapid heartbeat had slowed somewhat, he suddenly felt a faint tremor in the air above his head.

He raised his head and asked Yan Xiaohan, "What are you doing?"

Yan Xiaohan, his expression calm, answered, "Reciting scripture."

"..."

Fu Shen restrained himself for a long moment, sighed, then finally resigned himself to his fate and reached into the quilt.

The next morning, Xiao Xun had breakfast with the two of them. Halfway through the meal, he suddenly asked, "General, did something break in your room last night? Is everything all right?"

Fu Shen nearly choked on his porridge, guiltily remembering how while fooling around last night the two of them had accidentally kicked the hot water bottle on the bed onto the floor. There had been a crash as it broke loud enough to wake half the house.

"You're asking the right person." Yan Xiaohan licked a cut on the inside of his lip. While taking a pained gasp, he smiled unrepentantly and said, "Your Lord Marquis insisted on fighting me last night. He struck first."

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1. Cao Zhi, Wei and Jin Dynasty poet, "Poem of Seven Laments"

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

INSIDE THE FEILONG GUARD DEPOT, ALL WAS DIGNIFIED AND solemn.

Lord Yan, relaxed and alert, walked into the courtyard and saw everyone lying around like dead dogs. Curiously, he said, "Were you all up to wickedness last night?"

Wei Xuzhou, on his last gasp, lifted his head. "Your Honor, if you'd come any later, we would all have been eternally parted from you."

"Really?" Yan Xiaohan lifted a foot and turned around. "Then I'll go out for a stroll and you can all go in peace."

There was silence.

"Where is Shen Jizhi?" Yan Xiaohan sat at the desk in the central room. "Is there a result on the drug I asked him to examine yesterday?"

"Please don't talk about that drug of yours. Doctor Shen is still unconscious and can't get up," Wei Xuzhou. "You didn't see the devastation here last night, Your Honor. Yang Hexuan's death was an honorable one."

As they spoke, Shen Yice struggled to come toward them. His face was as white as a living ghost's, with dark circles under his eyes. Yan Xiaohan was truly shaken by this august countenance of his. He quickly said, "Someone get him a chair, quick."

Tang Guo quickly and deftly helped Shen Yice sit down and stood behind him massaging his shoulders.

Shen Yice said wearily, "Yesterday I tried the drug on some condemned prisoners in the North Prison. The drug is in the form of a powder. When prepared as a concoction, it has an unusual fragrance, not fatal to consume, only causing a sensation of numbness throughout the body. Later I guessed that perhaps this drug wasn't meant to be used orally, so I found a copper tray, poured the powder into it, then lit a fire under it, trying to see whether I could disperse its effects that way." As if recalling something horrifying, he paused briefly, then went on, "After it was heated, the powder in the tray turned into something like an ointment, with a sweet smell that assaulted the nose and stimulated the brain. Those condemned prisoners all looked drunk. I was standing close by and accidentally got a breath of it—

"When the coroner examined the corpse earlier, he said that Yang Hexuan showed no signs of poisoning, and he hadn't used a large quantity of aphrodisiac, either. At first, I didn't believe that, but later I understood that Yang Hexuan died from this drug.

"I won't conceal from you, just one breath was enough to make me feel like I was dreaming. I even forgot my own name. It was like being drunk and stupefied. My body was hot and dry. I wanted to scream and shout, and I felt like there was nothing I couldn't do. The feeling is very hard to describe, more blissful than bliss itself. Without that drug, the average person will never experience such happiness in this world."

Shen Yice pressed his temples and said with a bitter smile, "It was a good thing Xiao Tang was outside keeping guard the whole time. Seeing the situation had gone wrong, he charged in and dragged me out. But as soon as the door opened, the smell floated out. General Wei and the others were also infected. Though it wasn't as strong, I'm afraid they still didn't get a good night's sleep. And the condemned prisoners seemed to have gone mad. They couldn't be held back. The ones with weaker constitutions have already collapsed.

"Your Honor, do you know what the most frightening thing about this drug is?"

Yan Xiaohan's brow furrowed tightly. "Tell me."

"All men are greedy. After tasting ultimate happiness, they will crave it intensely, attempting again and again to pursue that happiness."

Yan Xiaohan's pupils contracted sharply. "It's addictive?"

Shen Yice nodded. "Also, when Xiao Tang cleaned up the copper tray for me, the drug in the tray was already gone. It wouldn't be perfectly accurate to say that it had 'cooked away.' What I ought to say is that it was like water evaporated by the sun. It had disappeared entirely."

For investigators like them, this property was even more frightening than its addictiveness. This meant that this drug could be used to kill invisibly and leave no trace. There wouldn't even be any clues on the body of the deceased. The symptoms were identical to dying in the saddle or a sudden attack.

Yan Xiaohan unexpectedly remembered the debt slips in Yang Hexuan's boot padding.

On first sight, he had thought it was strange. Yang Hexuan's aunt was the empress, his father and older brother both held posts at court. The family was wealthy, and his own official salary wasn't meager. How had he ended up owing money? Fifty liang was neither a very large nor a very small sum; for a person like Yang Hexuan, it was only a matter of a few meals.

But what if that money had gone to buy the drug?

With an addictive drug, not taking it would become unbearable as soon as you stopped, so you had to constantly buy it. Never mind emptying out your family treasury in the end; you would also leave behind a trail of debts.

"Baixu, what did the imperial physicians say about the drugs you brought back yesterday?"

Jiang Shu took out a sheet of letter paper and gave it to him. "Imperial Physician Song identified them all and wrote the names of the drugs on this paper. They're all ordinary aphrodisiacs, taking too much wouldn't poison anyone."

Yan Xiaohan read that paper from beginning to end, then folded it and put it aside. "Baixu, you and Daoxuan take a few people to Shuntian Prefecture and find out what cases of people dying in pleasure houses there have been during the last three months. Copy out the details of the cases and bring them back to me."

The Right Shenshu Corps' General Tao Beiming gave an affirmative and fell out of rank to go with Jiang Shu to follow orders.

"Zhixin."

The Right Shenwu Corps' General Can Fengchen rose to receive orders.

Yan Xiaohan said, "Go investigate Yang Hexuan's whereabouts over the last few days. Where he went regularly, who went with him. Keep a close watch on the people he's close to."

"Yes, sir," said Can Fengchen.

"Wei-xiong, aren't you pretty well acquainted with the Yangs?" Yan Xiaohan said. "We need to pay them a visit."

Wei Xuzhou looked woebegone. "Unfortunately, I'm not well acquainted."

"Think hard," Yan Xiaohan said soothingly, "you must have forgotten—there can't be a noble family in the capital your family hasn't formed a marriage tie with."

Wei Xuzhou didn't respond.

"Jizhi, you… forget about it, rest up." The aftereffects Shen Yice was experiencing wouldn't clear up at once. Yan Xiaohan couldn't stand to pressure him. "Xiao Tang, look after him."

Just the day before, he'd said he wasn't planning to stir up the troops, and today he had concentrated the pick of the Feilong Guard on this case. Yan Xiaohan took up a brush to write a memorial to the throne, recounting the details of the case and their present discoveries, repeatedly stressing that this drug was previously unknown and unheard of, and as soon as it spread, there would be no end of trouble.

The memorials of the Feilong Guard's Imperial Investigator could be brought directly in front of the emperor's eyes. Since Tian Tong had left, there had been no other brainless fool of a eunuch who would dare to block him. The emperor quickly annotated it with "An urgent matter, proceed as expedient." Having obtained the imperial sword, Yan Xiaohan didn't stop. With the confidence of justice on his side, he took Wei Xuzhou to pay a visit to the emperor's brother-in-law.

Matters there were as difficult to make headway with as expected. Dying in the saddle was no glorious death. Everyone in Yang Manor had their mouths stoppered like bottles, and Yang Xu in particular didn't give them a pleasant look from beginning to end. Yan Xiaohan, exercising patience, questioned him for a long time before finally working out that the family had in fact noticed the change in Yang Hexuan; they just hadn't taken it seriously.

Yang Hexuan was naturally wanton. The crowd of wives and concubines in the rear compound still weren't enough to satisfy him. He regularly went out to dally at pleasure houses and had ruined his health at a young age. His family had found doctors and medicines to treat him, but old habits were hard to change. Over time, everyone had stopped trying to help him. It just happened that lately the household had been preparing for his big brother Yang Sijing's wedding, so the manor's expenses were rather straitened. Yang Hexuan, going to draw money, had come up empty. He'd lost his temper and raised a big stink at home, then left in a huff.

His family had heard that he had been staying in Xinghua Alley and had thought he was just sulking, not expecting that the next time they heard news of him, he would have been parted from them forever.

Irascible and easily angered, burning with desire… It all tallied with the symptoms of taking the drug that Shen Yice had described. Yan Xiaohan observed closely; it seemed the Yangs still didn't know that he had died from taking drugs. They all thought it had been a mishap.

If a clean-living person died in the saddle, it would certainly be seen as fishy. But if a person who was habitually indiscreet died that way, even his nearest and dearest wouldn't doubt it.

Had Yang Hexuan not happened to die right after the case of Mu Boxiu, leading the Feilong Guard to investigate, this drug would have remained concealed beneath the undercurrent, silently spreading, leading countless people to go mad for it, ultimately chewing up all of Great Zhou from within.

How many others had died of this drug? Was Yang Hexuan an innocent unlucky wretch, or had he been fixed upon as the wick for the firecracker?

Two days later, the Feilong Guard once again assembled, but the situation didn't especially lend itself to optimism. The identities of the dead were all different. Though from the descriptions of their family members of their condition before death, it seemed as though they had all used the drug, they could find no traces to serve as evidence. Moreover, none of these people had any connection to Yang Hexuan. Their only similarity was that they all liked dallying in pleasure houses, but they had gone to different places, and the girls they were close with were all different. And from what Can Fengchen had turned up, the young lordlings who had been friendly with Yang Hexuan didn't appear to have taken drugs and become addicted, and no one had seen Yang Hexuan heating a copper tray to cook any kind of drug.

The leads in this case had broken off completely. Although Yan Xiaohan wished to investigate thoroughly, he hadn't come upon the right time, location, or social conditions; because there was presently a major event that needed to be prepared, the Jinwu Guard case had to be temporarily shelved.

* * *

The third day of the third month, the Vast Longevity Festival.

Emperor Yuantai paid his respects at the Imperial Ancestral Temple, offered sacrifice to heaven and earth, and received congratulations in Yuji Hall. The officials performed thirty-three obeisances, presented the memorial of congratulation, and held up wine cups to extend birthday wishes. Emperor Yuantai bestowed tea upon the officials. When the ceremony was over, the imperial carriage removed to Qichun Hall. The birthday feast would begin at noon.

Today was the Vast Longevity Festival. Apart from the central figure of Emperor Yuantai, the one who attracted the most gazes was the Marquis of Jingning, Fu Shen, who had just returned to court. After an absence of several months, the Marquis of Jingning's elegance was superior even to what it had been in the past. He still suited the title of "the face of the court." His Majesty had given him special dispensation not to kneel and had given him tender words of encouragement, bestowing upon him his own wine and fresh fruit. Sovereign and subject were in perfect harmony, so friendly that even Fu Shen himself nearly believed it.

Qichun Hall was very far from Yuji Hall. The emperor had ridden in his carriage, while the officials had to slowly walk over on foot. A young eunuch pushed Fu Shen's wheelchair for him. Fu Shen, after politely answering pleasantries from all around, suddenly narrowed his eyes and looked up ahead. He turned his head and asked the eunuch behind him, "Hey, that person walking up ahead with his head down, isn't that the Court of the Censorate's Imperial Censor Gu Shanlü?"

The eunuch looked carefully and answered, "Lord Marquis, that is indeed Officer Gu."

Fu Shen said, "Come on, let's go say hello."

The eunuch was utterly bewildered. He had probably never seen a military official of the first rank trying to worm his way into friendship with a civilian official of the fourth rank. "Yes, Lord Marquis."

"Imperial Censor Gu?"

Gu Shanlü had his head bowed in contemplation. Hearing someone call to him, he automatically raised his head to look that way—and saw no one.

After an aggrieved pause, Fu Shen said dismally, "Here, look down."

Gu Shanlü lowered his head and looked down. Not even in his dreams had he expected to see him. He quickly saluted. "Please forgive my lack of manners, Lord Marquis."

Fu Shen didn't take it to heart. Instead, he said politely, "In the case of the Eastern Tartar diplomatic mission, I heard that Imperial Censor Gu was acting on my behalf. I ought to have called upon you to express my thanks before, but there were too many things keeping me busy and I was in poor health. That is how I have come to delay up until now and am only seeing you today." He cupped his hands in a salute and said solemnly, "Imperial Censor Gu is virtuous. My gratitude is profound. Thank you."

Gu Shanlü hurriedly returned the salute in a panic. Fu Shen thought his reserve was interesting and thought he might as well say a few more words to him. "You seem gloomy, Imperial Censor Gu, not very cheerful. What difficulty have you run into?"

Gu Shanlü said, "Lord Marquis, you may simply call me by my courtesy name, Zhongxiu. I will not conceal from the Lord Marquis, my teacher Mr. Ceng Guang was recently arrested for his words and remains detained in the Shuntian Prefecture. The old fellow is getting on in years, and his health is poor. I am very troubled at heart, which is why… Alas, how embarrassing."

"Ceng Guang?" Fu Shen thought about it. "You mean the wise gentleman from the Kuangshan Academy, who was imprisoned last winter?"

"That is my teacher," Gu Shanlü said. "I received instruction at the Kuangshan Academy. When my school is in difficulties and my teacher in prison, as a student, how could I dare to stand by idly with my hands in my sleeves?"

But Fu Shen wasn't listening closely. He raised his head and looked into the distance. He seemed to smile. Then he stopped the conversation, saying consolingly, "Do not be overly worried, Zhongxiu. Heaven stands by the worthy. I trust that this misfortune can turn into a blessing for your honored teacher."

Gu Shanlü thanked him vaguely, not understanding why the Marquis of Jingning would ask about these matters out of nowhere. As they spoke, everyone had reached Qichun Hall. Armed imperial guards stood lining both sides of the road, while the head of the imperial guards stood high on the steps with his hands behind his back, his face grim and stern, his cold gaze making a person's legs weak when it swept their way.

Fu Shen heard two imperial secretaries behind him whispering in fright. "How horrifying... Who's offended him now?"

The young eunuch pushed the wheelchair up in front of the steps. Yan Xiaohan, stony-faced, quickly came down and bent to pick up Fu Shen, his gaze like a knife. He said to the dumbfounded eunuch, "What are you standing there for? Climb."

The officials at the foot of the stairs whispered among themselves. "Did you see his expression, all the veins on the backs of his hands... It's no wonder he's in a bad mood. You don't suppose he wants to throttle General Fu?"

As Yan Xiaohan, carrying Fu Shen, climbed the stairs, he quietly asked, "What were you saying to Gu Shanlü? You were smiling so openly."

Fu Shen remembered the look he had cast into the distance earlier. He held back laughter and answered earnestly, "It was nothing. I was saying that I had accidentally knocked over an old jar of vinegar."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

BEFORE YAN XIAOHAN COULD SPEAK, FU SHEN ADDED, "YAN-xiong, will there be pufferfish served today?"

Yan Xiaohan, seeing that his manner was very earnest and he didn't seem to be joking, froze, then said, "No. A poisonous food like that wouldn't be served at an imperial family feast."

"How strange," Fu Shen said. "I just saw such a big one, all round and puffed up, standing on the steps glaring at me, and he even had his hands behind his back..."

Yan Xiaohan nearly let him fall. Fu Shen hid his face against his chest, laughing silently.

When he set Fu Shen down outside the hall, Yan Xiaohan, as if in revenge, pinched his waist. Fu Shen, who was ticklish, recoiled. Pointing at him, he quietly said, "Naughty."

Yan Xiaohan gave him a glare, meaning, *You're one to talk.*

Fu Shen took some unknown meaning from it and roused once again. While Yan Xiaohan had his head bent, he drew near maliciously and said into his ear, laughing, "Lord Yan, don't keep pulling a long face. You'll damage your looks. It must take a lot of work to always look so angry, hm?"

That "hm" was soaked through with bone-numbing provocation; all of Yan Xiaohan's blood began to boil from his "hm," but there were eyes all around, so he had to suppress his urge to strip this big fox demon naked and throw him on the bed; as if venting, he pinched the webbing between his thumb and forefinger hard, then straightened and walked away, wearing a long face.

Fu Shen shook out his hand, which had been pinched numb, so pleased with himself he wanted to hum a tune. He was pushed away by the trembling young eunuch who came after him.

All the princes of the first rank, the prime minister, and the dukes and marquises of the second rank and up were seated at the front of the hall, while the remainder sat along two corridors to either side. The emperor and empress sat together at the head of the feast. When noon came and the feast began, the emperor drained the first cup of imperial wine. Foreign ambassadors came forward to present birthday greetings. Music of pipe and flute began with an accompanying drumbeat. Palace women from the Royal Academy threw flowers and displayed their dancing.

There was a second cup of wine. All the emperor's sons and brothers offered birthday congratulations and presented gifts in succession. Gifts were brought into the hall like flowing water, all the world's rare treasures. Emperor Yuantai and the empress admired each one in turn. The gold, silver, elegant playthings, and colorful silks they bestowed were plentiful.

Amid the hall full of splendor, Fu Shen narrowed his eyes, closely observing Empress Yang at Emperor Yuantai's side. Layer upon layer of powder had been applied to her face, but it still couldn't hide her look of weariness. There was redness beneath her eyes, as if she had been crying. Beneath her heavy ceremonial robes, her body was shaking slightly, only the range of the movement was very narrow, and there was excitement, music, and dancing all around to hide it; this kept it from being markedly unusual.

Fu Shen, expression unmoved, raised his wine cup and drank a mouthful of wine—

The taste was wrong.

Grim-faced, he picked up the wine pot on the table and raised the lid to look. A sour smell hit him in the face. The pot was full of vinegar!

That petty scoundrel Yan Menggui!

The cup had originally been full of wine. After drinking half of it, Fu Shen had refilled it from the pot and drunk it without looking closely. The taste was indescribable. It surged from the tip of his tongue to the top of his skull. Yan Xiaohan, surveying from the seat below the emperor's, had sat there watching the whole scene. Before Fu Shen raised his head, he silently looked away, his face hurting from holding back his smile.

The third cup of wine. The prime minister held up a cup, the officials stood to wish collectively for Emperor Yuantai to live as long as the heavens.

The fourth cup of wine. The Empress, representing all the consorts and concubines in the harem as their head, wished the emperor long life.

After some singing and dancing, performers came on stage, dressed as heavenly mothers holding immortal peaches and goddesses scattering flowers. A fulsome rain of flowers fell, gauze like mist wafted to the sides, revealing the figure of a hale and hearty lean old Daoist priest with a smooth and lustrous golden elixir pill in hand.

Fu Shen's eyes glinted. He tugged on the sleeve of the Marquis of Guanting beside him and quietly asked, "Where did that Daoist priest come from?"

The Marquis of Guanting said, smiling, "Jingyuan, you wouldn't know, that's Chunyang-daozhang from Qingxu Temple. The emperor's brother-in-law recommended this priest, and his elixirs were indeed effective, so His Majesty took him into the palace to support."

Fu Shen nodded absently, thinking to himself, *Effective my ass.*

Of successive generations of emperors, which one among them who had sought immortality and trusted alchemists had ultimately enjoyed long life? Emperor Yuantai was paranoid to begin with, and now that he had taken in a Daoist priest to fan the flames at his side, who knew what noxious winds would come their way in the future? Sooner or later, these imaginary things would become a source of calamity, bringing instability to the court, leaving the nation without peace.

Chunyang-daozhang had a lofty and otherworldly appearance. He walked up in front of Emperor Yuantai, swaying, and announced in a peculiar, veiled tone, "If you please, Your Majesty."

Emperor Yuantai leaned forward and pinched the golden pill between thumb and forefinger.

Fu Shen suddenly cried out, "Your Majesty, be careful!"

He had two dates in his hand. With a flick of his fingertips, two dark shapes flew through the air, swiftly passed Emperor Yuantai's chest, were blocked by his outstretched arm, and finally rolled down along the Imperial Robes to the carpet.

Almost at the same time as he acted, Yan Xiaohan charged over and flipped Chunyang-daozhang over on the ground.

Emperor Yuantai was bewildered, his heart pounding. He had hardly realized yet what had happened. The hand lying on his table shook slightly.

Below, a eunuch had already picked up the dates to present them. Emperor Yuantai examined them against the bright light coming in through the window and saw that the two dates each had a coldly shining steel needle stuck into it, over an inch long.

At the emperor's birthday feast, a Daoist priest supported by the imperial family had dared to attempt to assassinate His Majesty!

"What's going on here?" The veins on Emperor Yuantai's neck popped up one after another. He was so angry he was trembling all over. He yelled, "Fu Shen! Yan Xiaohan! What is going on!"

This scene had some irony to it. At the crucial moment between life and death, the only two people Emperor Yuantai trusted subconsciously were Fu Shen, whom he was hopelessly afraid of and had done everything in his power to suppress, and Yan Xiaohan, whom he had only taken back up for use recently.

High winds reveal the sturdy grass, and turmoil makes known the loyal officials; sadly, he had personally pushed down those loyal officials.

"Permit me to report, Your Majesty." Fu Shen sighed inwardly and fell out of formation to say, "This villain had the dishonorable intent to use the presentation of the golden pill as an opportunity to assassinate Your Majesty. I had no time to come to the rescue and could only resort to this crude method. I have given offense and ask Your Majesty's pardon."

White-faced, Emperor Yuantai said, "Present the serving tray."

Fu Shen immediately said, "Your Majesty, be careful. I'm afraid there is something strange about that serving tray. There is a mechanism built into it. When the golden pill is lifted, it will shoot out needles. To avoid accidental injury, Your Majesty should permit… permit the Feilong Guard to dismantle it."

Wei Xuzhou and a number of imperial guards bound Chunyang-daozhang hand and foot, while Yan Xiaohan picked up the serving tray on the floor and inspected it closely. He discovered that there were indeed two small holes lined up on its side. After showing this to the emperor, he took a silver knife from a fruit platter and carefully pried open the serving tray.

Beneath the satin was only a thin layer of wood. There was a small, round opening where the golden pill was placed, allowing the pill to connect to the trigger mechanism inside the tray. Once the pill was removed and the weight changed, it would power the mechanism and shoot out steel needles.

The imperial physician on duty brought over a puppy to test for poison. He pierced its belly with a needle taken from one of the dates, and in the space of a few breaths, the dog's whole body began to spasm. It foamed at the mouth and died.

As expected, there was strong poison applied to that needle, which would cause the throat to seal as soon as the needle touched blood. It was fortunate that Fu Shen had been sitting close by, and that he had good eyesight and was extremely cautious; that was why he had dared to act boldly, saving His Majesty's life in a flash. Had Emperor Yuantai opted not to permit Fu Shen to attend the feast, relying solely on the others present, the emperor's funeral arrangements would probably be underway by now.

"Chunyang, We have treated you well." Emperor Yuantai's chest undulated nonstop. He stared at him coldly. "Why would you conspire to murder Us?"

This Chunyang-daozhang was no ordinary person. With death near at hand, he was perfectly calm and at peace, treating Emperor Yuantai's fury as though he didn't see it. Bound hand and foot, he actually began to recite the *Dao De Jing* in a whisper under his breath.

A birthday feast had nearly turned into a murder case, a funeral. With the accompaniment of Chunyang-daozhang's exceptionally inscrutable voice, this scene was terrifyingly strange. Each and every one of the civilian and military officials present broke out in gooseflesh. Yan Xiaohan, seeing that he wouldn't talk even under pain of death, quietly instructed, "Gag him."

Emperor Yuantai said, "Take him to be interrogated."

With the Feilong Guard there, the three chief judicial ministries didn't care to come forward to meddle in this case. Wei Xuzhou took Chunyang-daozhang away. At his seat, Emperor Yuantai briefly closed his eyes and calmed himself. He slowly opened his eyes and suddenly shouted: "Yang Xu, what a good man you recommended!"

Yang Xu's face was ashen. He removed his official cap and prostrated himself to beg forgiveness on the spot, kowtowing nonstop. Empress Yang was his little sister and was unavoidably implicated. She hurried to kneel as well.

But as soon as she stood from her seat, agony suddenly appeared on her face. Clutching her underbelly, she stumbled a few steps. Then her legs went weak and she tumbled down on the high platform.

Emperor Yuantai was so frightened he leapt to his feet in a panic. "The empress! The imperial physicians? Where are the imperial physicians!"

The someone cried out in alarm, "... Blood! Her Majesty the empress is bleeding!"

It was like a bolt out of the blue. The entire hall fell silent. It was noon, the daylight in full splendor, lighting up the inside of the palace to shining grandeur. Where the empress's ceremonial robes fell, directly beneath her, a circle of dim dark red was gradually spreading.

Though all the officials present were men, the vast majority of them were married. Even if they hadn't previously witnessed such a scene, they could still more or less guess what was happening.

An imperial physician rushed forward hefting a medicine chest. He didn't permit the empress to be moved. His expression grave, he checked the pulse in her left and right arms and at last kowtowed toward Emperor Yuantai with a despairing look, feeling it wasn't only his official's cap at stake; he might not even be able to keep his head on his shoulders.

"Reporting to His Majesty, Her Majesty the empress is two months pregnant, but the condition of her pulse shows portents of a miscarriage... This pregnancy has become dangerous..."

Every word he said was like a heavy hammer slamming against Emperor Yuantai's pounding temples. In his vision, those ceremonial robes and fresh blood contorted into a strange image. There was a look of sorrow on the woman's pale face, but the red lips were brilliant; in his eyes, they seemed to be silently showing force and sneering.

Liars! They were all liars!

Under the assault of intense fury, a breath caught in his throat. Emperor Yuantai wanted to fly into a rage, but he suddenly felt his body tip as he lightly fell over.

The situation immediately went out of control.

"Your Majesty!"

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

THE VAST LONGEVITY FESTIVAL DURING THE TWENTY-SIXTH YEAR of Yuantai that had opened with birthday wishes from officials and the shared joy of the people closed with the emperor fainting and the empress having a miscarriage.

Yan Xiaohan was in a hurry to return to handle the case and could only see Fu Shen to the Dongsheng Gate. He had a young eunuch get servants from Yan Manor to come wait outside the palace gate. While no one was around, he bent down and hugged Fu Shen, instructing, "I don't know how long I'm going to spend investigating this case, so don't wait up for me. Go to bed early."

Fu Shen was probably still thinking of what had just transpired. His expression wasn't relaxed. Hearing these words, he nodded.

Yan Xiaohan continued, "I saw that you didn't eat well at the palace feast just now. Eat something else when you get home, don't go hungry. Don't forget to take your medicine."

Fu Shen finally freed himself from his thoughts. He pulled Yan Xiaohan down to eye level by his collar. Rather than saying he kissed him, it would be more accurate to say that he bumped his lips and said commandingly, "You're much too young to go around imitating fussy old maids. Shut it, no chattering."

This really was like making eyes at a blind man. Yan Xiaohan was caught between laughter and tears, thinking that with his usual care, like holding something in your mouth trying to keep it from melting or holding it in both hands trying to keep it from dropping, was completely unappreciated by this darling Marquis. Next time he ought to make sure he couldn't get out of bed for three days, give him a chance to appreciate the value of an old maid, learn to be content with his lot.

The two of them only had time to exchange a few tender phrases before the young eunuch returned to report on his mission. Yan Xiaohan watched as the two of them disappeared outside the palace gate, and the smile on his face cooled bit by bit. He switched to an unfeeling expression. When he turned to go back to the North Prison, he had once again become the vicious and merciless Imperial Investigator.

As soon as Fu Shen returned to Yan Manor, he shut himself up in his room, giving instructions that he was not to be disturbed. The servants saw that his expression was unpleasant and didn't dare to give any counsel; even Du Leng was shut out. It was only in the evening that someone worked up the nerve to knock on his door and invite him to eat, tremblingly saying that if he didn't eat, the master would certainly be angry if he found out.

When these words were spoken, Du Leng felt that things were going to go badly. A person like Fu Shen, who had occupied a high position for a long time, hated most to be threatened. Never mind Yan Xiaohan, even heaven itself wouldn't find him easy to handle.

Indeed, Fu Shen said coldly from inside the room, "I've been going easy on you all, haven't it?"

The maid holding the tray of food was about to be scared to her knees. Tears stood in her eyes. She could neither leave nor stay. Du Leng couldn't stand it and was about to send her away when suddenly he heard Fu Shen say, "… Forget it, bring it in."

Huh?!

As Beiyan's army doctor, Du Leng was only too well acquainted with Fu Shen's awful character. His word was law in the army; once his temper came out, his wrath would be thunderous, sparing no one's feelings. Few people dared to meet this onslaught head on. This temper wasn't so bad when it came to official business, but in matters of everyday life it seemed particularly unbending. Du Leng had previously been thrown out of his tent by the collar for making him take his medicine; he really couldn't imagine that this person who would make a concession at a single sentence was the Marquis of Jingning he knew.

In fact, Fu Shen had no appetite, but as soon as he heard the maid say "the master will be angry," he remembered Yan Xiaohan saying to him, "This is the first time in my life I've cared for someone so much."

When Yan Xiaohan cared for him so much, what did it matter if he made a concession or two for his sake? If a grown man encountered difficulties out in the world and came home and vented his anger on his wife and children, could he still be called a man?

Since antiquity, it had been hard for heroes not to falter in the face of beauty. It could not be otherwise.

The palace remained bustling until late at night. His Majesty had woken in the afternoon and, despite his weakened condition, dealt with the empress and Yang Xu. As for what had caused His Majesty to fly into such a rage, the inside story was unknown to outsiders, but Yan Xiaohan had heard and understood it all; he was even a little regretful that they hadn't managed to take care of the crown prince while they were at it.

But after this, the favor enjoyed by the crown prince would probably decline to nothing.

The Feilong Guard's investigation, however, was not proceeding smoothly. They had turned Qingxu Temple upside down and interrogated the people who normally had dealings with Chunyang-daozhang one by one, but the origin of the poison and the motive of the assassin both remained a complete mystery. Chunyang-daozhang meanwhile was like a perfectly sealed clamshell. Despite alternated coercion, bribery, and torture, he maintained his silence.

Yan Xiaohan thought to himself that if this went on, the Feilong Guard would become the next Jinwu Guard. As he thought this, Tang Guo walked out of the interrogation room and numbly washed his hands. He carefully washed all his slim, pale fingers clean one by one, then looked up and said to Yan Xiaohan, "He's already half-dead. If he won't talk tomorrow, there's nothing else I can do."

"Let's leave it at this for today, let me keep thinking." Yan Xiaohan muttered to himself. "I keep thinking there's something else strange about him, and it doesn't seem to be connected to the Yangs. Qingxu Temple has been in the capital for decades, with plentiful worshippers. As a monk, why doesn't he stick to being above it all? What's he doing getting mixed up with things at court?"

Tang Guo only knew how to skin; he didn't know how to dissect. After listening to these questions blankly, he responded with an equally doubtful gaze.

Yan Xiaohan said, "... Forget it, go get some rest. We'll question him again tomorrow."

It was already late at night when he came home. The whole house was sleeping. The gatekeeper, eyes heavy with sleep, opened the gate for him, holding up a lantern. Yan Xiaohan quietly walked into the compound. The maid keeping watch outside heard movement and stood to help him change and wash while relating to him in a whisper what had happened in the manor that afternoon.

Yan Xiaohan remembered that Fu Shen had plainly been doing just fine when he had left the palace. Puzzling over this, he opened the door as quietly as possible. As soon as he took a single step inside, a query unexpectedly came from inside the completely dark room: "Back?"

Yan Xiaohan's tense movements relaxed. He went to the table and lit a lantern. "Why aren't you asleep yet?"

He looked over by the rather dim candle flame and saw Fu Shen leaning against the head of the bed, wearing a thin inner robe, the quilt only covering his legs. His eyes were slightly narrowed because of the sudden light. There was an odd sense of frailty and dejection to his silhouette.

"Couldn't sleep," Fu Shen said. "How was it at the palace?"

Yan Xiaohan didn't answer his question. He took off his shoes and got into bed; his first order of business was to pull up the quilt and wrap him up tightly. "As long as you're sitting here meditating in the middle of the night instead of sleeping, would it kill you to put on another layer?"

Spring nights in the third month were still very cold. The inside of the quilt was icy. Yan Xiaohan felt around, then simply hugged him, lifted the quilt, and covered both their bodies with it. Fu Shen, like a feral cat that had found a den, didn't talk back when scolded; he dropped his head to pillow it against Yan Xiaohan's shoulder.

"Tell me, is it that you can't sleep, or that you're brooding about something?" Yan Xiaohan held his waist with one arm and used the other hand to push his messy hair behind his ears. "I heard from the servants that you were in a bad mood this afternoon. Who annoyed you, hm?"

Fu Shen kept his mouth tightly shut. He felt that he needed an opening to pour out his troubles, but it had been too long since he had vented to anyone. He had forgotten how. Though there were thousands of words in his mind, he didn't know where to start.

For an adult man accustomed to bearing responsibility, talking about his emotions was a greater difficulty than cutting open his own chest. Yan Xiaohan didn't rush him. He put out the light with a flick of his wrist. The darkness became the best hiding place, letting him stop hesitating and slowly let down his emotional guard.

Finally, Fu Shen quietly asked, "What happened to the empress?"

"A cup of poisoned wine," Yan Xiaohan said calmly. "It's been announced that she simply lost too much blood and died despite receiving treatment."

Fu Shen seemed to laugh in the dark night. "Fair enough. His Majesty couldn't have allowed her to keep living."

Yan Xiaohan said, "You know?"

Fu Shen said, "Yes. The empress wasn't pregnant with the emperor's child. It has been a long time since His Majesty has set foot inside Kunning Palace. With the state of affairs in the hall then, he understood at a glance. Otherwise he wouldn't have passed out from fury."

Yan Xiaohan's voice was rough. "You..."

Fu Shen admitted it candidly: "My doing."

Silence.

As if his tail had been stepped on, Yan Xiaohan nearly jumped out of bed; only then did he realize what Fu Shen meant. Not knowing whether to laugh or cry, he slapped Fu Shen's arm. "You don't have to be in such a hurry to answer! You caused the empress's miscarriage, not her pregnancy! A married man like you can't say such ambiguous things! Are you trying to scare me to death?"

Fu Shen rubbed his stinging arm and inwardly cursed him for being so jumpy, but the darkness weighing on his heart had strangely dispelled somewhat because of Yan Xiaohan's reaction.

"Fine, I'll say it again. The empress's miscarriage at the Vast Longevity Festival was arranged on my orders," Fu Shen said. "There is a kind of medicine in her daily food and drink that is harmless to consume on its own but causes blood clots when combined with wine. The empress was three months pregnant, her pregnancy was at a delicate stage. Drinking a few cups of wine at the birthday feast immediately brought on a miscarriage."

Yan Xiaohan had never expected such a thing. "You planted someone next to the empress? When did this happen?"

"I didn't deliberately plant him there. It's a long story." Fu Shen asked, "Do you remember that polo game several years back, when I saved a young eunuch?

"He was later sent to Kunning Palace to sweep and do odd jobs and obtained the empress's favor through his skill in hairdressing. After I returned to the capital, he sent me word from the palace, saying that the empress was having a love affair with a certain guard.

"He wanted to repay his debt of gratitude, and also to help me get revenge. About a month ago, he sent another message, saying that the empress seemed to be pregnant. But it had been many months since His Majesty had graced Kunning Palace with his presence, so the child definitely couldn't be kept. But the empress couldn't stand to give it up. She even meant to entice His Majesty to stay the night with her after the Vast Longevity Feast, then pass a fake off as the real thing.

"I thought then that they couldn't get off so easily."

He had been heartbroken in the pouring rain, and had pledged that, "Today's disgrace will one day be repaid."

On a public occasion, with everyone watching, the empress had shown that she had cuckolded His Majesty, and Emperor Yuantai had been forced to swallow the insult for the sake of appearances, hold his nose and acknowledge this bastard, resulting in him swooning from anger. What was this compared to the disgrace of that arranged marriage? And once the crown prince's birth mother was involved in such a scandal, the crown prince's good times would shortly end as well.

A tooth for a tooth, and eye for an eye—blood calls for blood. Never mind that Emperor Yuantai's conduct in its entirety was a thousand times crueler than Fu Shen's. When he had been invited by Emperor Yuantai to observe this meticulously planned farce, he ought to have been filled with the pleasure of revenge, eager to see Emperor Yuantai die as soon as possible. But events were hard to predict. Chunyang-daozhang had cropped up at the Vast Longevity Feast, a wild card he hadn't expected.

At the moment of imminent peril, Fu Shen had saved Emperor Yuantai's life.

The change had been too sudden. He hadn't had time to consider. All his actions had been an instantaneous, unconscious reaction. By the time he realized what he had done, everything had been settled.

Fu Shen had suddenly realized that he was in fact the biggest clown in this whole farce.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

"TELL THE TRUTH. THE AMBUSH IN QINGSHA GAP, THE ATTACK on the Eastern Tartar diplomatic mission—did the Jinwu Guard do that on His Majesty's orders?"

Fu Shen agreed and calmly said, "You could get there by guesswork."

He felt Yan Xiaohan's hand tighten abruptly on his. He laughed softly. "I know what you want to say. Even if he died mad, he would deserve it, right?

"But, Yan-xiong," he said a little unhappily, "no one got to where he is today in a single step.

"His Majesty is old now, paranoid and jealous, credulous of slander, but he wasn't like this before. Though the Duke of Ying Manor has declined, it remains a colossus, and there are still the Beiyan Cavalry and the Marquis of Jingning Manor… Without His Majesty, the present Fu family wouldn't exist, never mind me.

"In the second year of Yuantai, when His Majesty was newly enthroned, there was turbulence in the north. My grandfather was transferred to the post of military commissioner of Ganzhou, and His Majesty gave him all the support he needed, military power, provisions, soldiers' pay… He nearly emptied out the national treasury, which hadn't been very abundant to begin with. That was what was needed to pacify the north. My father, my Second Uncle, the mainstays serving in the Beiyan Army now, and many generals who have been scattered to all the borders grew up during that war.

"Just after you and I were born, the empire entered a period of stability and prosperity. I cannot ignore my conscience and say that it was all done through the Fu family's contributions over the years."

Yan Xiaohan gave an ambiguous laugh. Fu Shen could hear his disagreement, but Yan Xiaohan didn't refute him, only indicated for him to continue speaking.

"He was once a wise emperor," Fu Shen said. "On the day he conferred the marriage, you asked why I didn't simply revolt. I told you then that I could not allow the heroic reputation of the Beiyan Army to be destroyed overnight. There was another reason that I did not tell you. Today you've seen for yourself—actually, I couldn't bring myself to do it.

"So I can only take my revenge on him with unworthy means and can't even resist saving him. Even if I must be a whore, I will still raise a memorial arch…"

Hearing this, Yan Xiaohan immediately smacked the side of his waist gently and said in warning, "Don't talk nonsense."

"Just as long as you understand me," Fu Shen said. "Everything I have was given to me by His Majesty. Now he wants to take it back and is afraid that I won't be willing to let go."

It was an ordinary alteration. The country was the same country it had always been, but the human hearts within it were no longer the human hearts of past acquaintances.

He couldn't go on. However close Yan Xiaohan was to him, he couldn't feel what he felt, after all. The tangle of contradictions, the repeated variations made even Fu Shen himself feel vexed, never mind that to the eyes of another, this perhaps looked like a kind of blind devotion on his part.

"Haha…"

Fu Shen raised his head in astonishment, almost thinking that Yan Xiaohan had suddenly gone crazy. Then he was pulled into an embrace—not an affectionate hug between adults, but a hug of completely unmasked doting and love, like coddling a child.

"Jingyuan, do you know what you're like?" Yan Xiaohan kissed the top of his head and held back laughter, said to Fu Shen, who had *you're nuts* written all over his face. "A good child who's never done anything bad who suddenly does a bad thing one day and feels guilty about it then owns up to everything himself before anyone can even ask."

Fu Shen really wanted to kick him.

That tactless scoundrel Yan Xiaohan couldn't resist laughing again. "Listen, isn't it exhausting being an upright gentleman? Hm?

"After all's said and done, it's simply that you hate him for being suspicious but can't change your deep-seated loyal disposition. If I were in your place, I wouldn't have any misgivings. After all, I'm a crafty sycophant ready to swap allegiances at any moment. I can raise waves even without wind, never mind when people choose to provoke me."

Fu Shen said, "Of course I'm not like you."

Yan Xiaohan said, "Then are you a sage?"

Fu Shen said, "Why do I feel like you're just mocking me from a new angle?"

"Not at all," Yan Xiaohan said. "Since you aren't me, why should you seek vengeance over petty offenses like a craven villain? And since you aren't a sage, why force yourself to requite insult with virtue, be totally selfless?

"No one can force you to take revenge. Whether you are willing to take it up or let it go depends entirely on your own will. Or if you aren't willing to do it yourself, there's no problem in letting me do it for you.

"Besides, even a lump of earth still has some temper. When His Majesty has played such a dirty trick on you, what's wrong with hating him? No matter what the dynasty or era, injuring a loyal general out of doubt and suspicion isn't the conduct of a wise ruler. When a person has done wrong, he must be ready to accept the penalty. It's unreasonable to expect the injured party to absolve him."

Fu Shen had never before heard him hold forth at such length. He felt that it was a little novel. And he had no way of refuting it.

Yan Xiaohan put a hand under his chin and, smiling, said, "Lord Marquis, at sixteen you dared to crow 'His Majesty is wrong!' Why are you now so cautious, keeping your head down?"

Events of the past were like a surging tide, connected to distant memories on the horizon. Fu Shen's throat stung.

"Don't let yourself be bound hand and foot by loyalty and righteousness." Yan Xiaohan bent his head to kiss him. His voice was soft, but every word seemed to slam against Fu Shen's heart. "Dare to love, dare to hate, take pleasure in gratitude and vengeance. Jingyuan, no one but you can fetter you."

He had watched Fu Shen's figure disappear into the distance time and again, seen him grow from a boy to a young man, go from general to noble, his triumphant will constantly worn down by the wind and sand. Praise and censure had come in endless waves, but the responsibility he shouldered had never been put down.

Sometimes Yan Xiaohan wished he were as deranged as rumor had it. He wanted to seal away the sixteen-year-old Fu Shen, stop him forever at the age when he had known no suffering, or else, as on the day the marriage was bestowed, maliciously watch all that he had believed in, relied upon, and protected be overturned and collapse, so he could no longer be an upright gentleman and be henceforth freed of his shackles.

All unreachable phantasms were the projections of the world's most hopeless wishes. Yan Xiaohan lost control rarely and was clear-headed much of the time. While clear-headed, he could say to Fu Shen, "In my heart, you are above all others. No one else compares." But it was only when he lost control that he dared to admit that when Fu Shen had donned his armor and gone into battle, setting foot on the path of the loyal general, it had been one of the two great instances of helplessness in his life.

In this world, being a loyal official was not only bitter, it was also fatal.

He had never expected that somehow, by some quirk of fate, he and this person would one day be a loving couple.

Though Fu Shen had to stay in a wheelchair, he was still one of the thorny weapons of the mortal world, not to be offended lightly. But tonight, when he was pulled from his gloom into a warm entanglement, an almost illusive satisfaction grew in Yan Xiaohan's chest in a daze, as if he had at last managed to spread his wings and honestly embrace the person he most wanted to protect.

Breathing intertwined, lips and teeth locked together, heartbeats gradually synchronized. Fu Shen's finger gently smoothed the lines of his slightly damp jet-black hair. It was unclear who was actually comforting whom.

The night was fleeting.

Fu Shen didn't know when he fell asleep. When he woke, Yan Xiaohan had already left. It was midmorning, the breeze gentle and the sun warm, the quilt still pleasantly warm. He had had a rare comfortable and contented night of peaceful sleep.

The chaos of yesterday's Vast Longevity Feast and the depression he had nowhere to vent seemed to be things of the distant past. Many things, while one was hung up on them, were as huge as the sky. Once one had gotten past them, though, the realization came that there wasn't all that much to them.

But the most important thing was that there was a person willing to use the utmost patience to stay beside him, untangle his knotted thoughts for him without finding him a nuisance, try to understand his perhaps entirely senseless undulating emotions.

How hard on Yan Xiaohan, a court lackey roundly cursed by the scholar, to also have to endure the humiliation of trying to comprehend the thoughts of loyal officials.

Before lunch, a eunuch came from the palace to convey an imperial decree. The Marquis of Jingning had performed a meritorious service in saving the emperor's life; His Majesty, in commendation of his loyalty, was bestowing upon him several cases of medicinal ingredients, gold and silver, precious gems, and other such articles. There was also a verbal instruction specially sent, asking him to mention any reward he might want.

Fu Shen considered briefly, turned to look at Yan Manor's main gate, and laughed. "Loyalty to one's sovereign and protection of one's nation are a subject's duty. I am ashamed to receive His Majesty's generous grant. His Majesty's favor is vast. How could I dare to be greedy for more? I have only one presumptuous request that I ask you to communicate, Eunuch."

All smiles, the eunuch said, "Name it, Lord Marquis."

Fu Shen seriously said, "At the Vast Longevity Festival yesterday, the Feilong Guard was acting in the capacity of bodyguard, protecting His Majesty's safety. But a cunning malefactor nearly brought about disaster. As the head of the Feilong Guard, my humble wife can hardly escape censure. Husband and wife are as one in body and mind. I hope that His Majesty will permit me to balance my achievement against his error and forgive my humble wife the fault of his inadequate protection."

It was as if a bolt out of the blue had struck the roof of Yan Manor. Even the eunuch was dazed. He nearly thought he was hearing things. White-faced, he asked, "Lord Marquis… wh-what did you just say…?"

Fu Shen said, smiling, "Hm? Was I unclear?"

"Perfectly clear, perfectly clear…" Beads of sweat poured off the eunuch. He felt as if he had heard a tremendous secret and would be silenced by Yan Xiaohan that night.

Watching the eunuch who had delivered the decree run away in a flurry, Fu Shen carelessly turned and met the eyes of the dumbstruck maids and pages in the courtyard.

"What are you looking at me for? Is it really so moving?" he said unflappably. "Don't blame me for being softhearted, it's that your master was really so worried about it. He spent half of last night weeping in my arms."

"..."

Fu Shen had the cases carried away while he went to eat lunch with an easy conscience. After eating his meal, he needed to digest. Fu Shen remembered that Yan Manor was not far from Qingxu Temple. That Daoist priest's arrival really had been peculiar; he couldn't resist being curious, so he had Du Leng push him out for a stroll in its vicinity.

The formerly flourishing temple had already become deserted. There was desolation everywhere in Qingxu Temple, with visitors few and far between. To prevent anyone escaping the net, Yan Xiaohan had assigned a team of imperial guards to stand watch here. By a great coincidence, leading them was Wei Xuzhou, General Wei, whom Fu Shen had met once.

General Wei was extremely sophisticated concerning the ways of the world. At first, he had also thought that Yan Xiaohan and Fu Shen weren't suited to each other, but from Yan Xiaohan's attitude after the wedding, he could clearly tell that Yan Xiaohan's attitude toward Fu Shen was remarkable. Whether Fu Shen felt the same was hard to say, but their Lord Yan certainly valued the Marquis of Jingning quite highly.

Seeing Fu Shen coming, he was inwardly speechless while outwardly welcoming him. His manner remained amiable, and he even voluntarily offered to let Fu Shen go in.

Fu Shen still remembered his first meeting with him. Wei Xuzhou hadn't been so cordial then. In spite of himself, he smiled and said, "Aren't you afraid that I'm the assassin's accomplice, General Wei?"

"What are you saying, Lord Marquis?" Wei Xuzhou said immediately. "You're one of our own."

Fu Shen lowered his eyes and smiled, repeating, "'One of our own.'"

The two old foxes seemed each to have acquired the information he wanted from this riddle-like dialogue. They smiled at each other. Wei Xuzhou made an inviting gesture, and Fu Shen nodded to him slightly in acknowledgment. He said, "Then I'll impose on you. Du Leng, let's go."

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

THE LAYOUT OF THE QINGXU TEMPLE WAS SIMILAR TO OTHER ordinary Daoist temples. The buildings were symmetrically arranged along the central axis, with a Hall of the Daoist Trinity as its main hall, statues of the Three Divine Teachers consecrated within it, and behind it four reception halls, an altar, a clock tower, and so on. The whole temple wasn't on an especially large scale, but with quiet, winding paths amid lush, verdant trees, it opened up a tranquil universe in this world.

Du Leng pushed Fu Shen slowly along the uneven stone path, as if they were two of the most ordinary worshippers possible. The Feilong Guard had already searched this compound from the inside out; Fu Shen couldn't tell anything new from it and was only using this as a place to collect his thoughts. In fact, there was still a doubt in his mind that he had never mentioned to anyone else, yet which weighed heavily on his mind at every moment.

It was the box of blood-spattered Eastern Pearls that Yu Qiaoting had brought him the day after he and Yan Xiaohan were married.

Fu Shen had had him take it away and deal with it, but he had never forgotten that incident. No detail related to the Zhe

Clan was trivial. Those old opponents had been eyeing him hungrily from start to finish. Though they seemed to have been pacified, in secret they were sharpening their claws, hibernating while waiting for a chance to launch a fatal attack.

Fu Shen casting off the position of Beiyan Commander and returning to the capital to convalesce had no doubt given them hope, even giving them the guts to take this opportunity to probe forward. But after all this time, they had yet to strike; they must have been worried that this was a ruse put together by Great Zhou's sovereign and official working in concert.

The Beiyan Cavalry was certainly not unprepared. The only thing that made Fu Shen uneasy was that he had no clear idea of how many spies the Zhe Clan had in the capital—had they been involved in the death of the Jinwu Guard and the assassination attempt at the Vast Longevity Festival? Had that box of Eastern Pearls been pure provocation, or had it been some meaningful hint?

Eastern Pearls were a jewel of ultimate value for the Zhe Clan. Apart from the tribute they paid to Great Zhou, within their own clan, only the wives and mothers of their leaders, equivalent to the empresses and empress dowagers of the Central Plains, were qualified to wear them. Therefore, the Zhe often used Eastern Pearls to represent an empress, and the empress had just happened to suffer an attack on the day of the Vast Longevity Festival. Was that a coincidence?

Making surface-level associations, a golden pill and an Eastern Pearl were similar in form. That was also very suspicious; and the name of the Eastern Pearls contained the word "eastern;" could that be hinting at the crown prince's Eastern Palace, which had taken the greatest damage from this?

After a while of thinking wildly like this, the wheelchair seemed to roll over a small rock. Fu Shen was jolted and came back from his musings. He looked up and asked doubtfully, "Where is this?"

"I don't know either," Du Leng said awkwardly. "I think I've gotten us lost…"

"Brilliant," Fu Shen said with a mocking laugh. He pointed at random. "Let's go that way. The place is only so big. You can get out with your eyes closed. Isn't there a little building up ahead?"

Du Leng was so humiliated he didn't dare to make a peep. He gloomily pushed Fu Shen in that direction. The two of them stopped in front of the three-floor little building. Fu Shen smirked with interest and said curiously, "A scripture library? And so out of the way, for that matter."

They had passed by many halls. While Fu Shen had been lost in thought along the way, he could still work out that they were probably in one of the corners within Qingxu Temple. The location of this scripture library was remote, very far from the wing where the Daoist priests lived, and concealed behind a bit of a stretch of forest. It seemed as if people rarely came here; it was very hard to find. Would people really come here to read scripture?

"Let's go in and have a look."

With great difficulty, Du Leng got Fu Shen and the wheelchair up the steps. He was so tired he was panting. "We can't go in. There's a lock on the door."

Fu Shen went over and took a look, then said, "A trifle." Saying so, with a flick of the wrist, he pulled a small knife out from somewhere and in a flash had pried open the brass lock on the door. When he gave a push, the wooden double doors fell wide open. The smell of old paper mixed with dust hit them in the face.

Du Leng was speechless.

Fu Shen's hands were too quick. Du Leng hadn't even seen his movements clearly. That big, heavy brass lock was like a toy in his hands.

Most importantly, he was an invalid. Why could he pull out a knife just like that?!

There was dust everywhere in the library. Puffing and blowing again, Du Leng carried the wheelchair over the threshold. He was a doctor; he really couldn't effortlessly heft the Marquis up to the second floor like it was nothing like those military men.

"Forget it, forget it. Close the door." Fu Shen really didn't have the heart to continue. Leaning against the arms of the wheelchair, he stood up. "I'll walk by myself."

The state of his injury was really very delicate. The kneecaps had shattered entirely and the tendons had been damaged, but it wasn't bad enough that he couldn't stand up. With proper recuperation, there was hope that he would make a full recovery in the future. But for the time being, he really couldn't walk as usual. Even when the wounds healed, he wouldn't be able to spend long periods at the front as he had when he was in perfect health.

The awkwardness came from the emperor having a spy in the army. There had been no way to conceal the news of Fu Shen's injury. His Majesty had immediately issued a decree ordering him to return to the capital to convalesce. Fu Shen had already known that he feared him, but he hadn't expected him to be so impatient. He certainly couldn't tell His Majesty the news that he had hopes of making a full recovery, or else he might not survive a whole month in the capital.

He could only meet plot with plot, exaggerate the severity of his injury, prioritize preserving his life. The crippled appearance was put on entirely for His Majesty's benefit. Fu Shen's bones were in fact mostly healed. He could stand up and walk for a while without problems. It was just that he normally had to pretend in front of others. He couldn't slip up.

Du Leng knew his real condition and had even mixed up a medicine to make his crippled performance more realistic; taking it made a person's legs lose strength and sensation. The results were outstanding; even Shen Yice had been tricked by them.

Du Leng turned and shut the door and uneasily exhorted, "Slow down, you haven't been walking lately, take care not to fall. Do your legs still hurt?"

"A little, nothing serious." Fu Shen carefully found his balance and slowly, leaning against the wall, walked through the bookshelves standing as numerous as trees in the forest. "No one has been here for a very long time, and no one has swept, but the steps at the door are very clean, as if people come here often. Strange."

Du Leng followed him, pushing the wheelchair. Fu Shen went up to the second floor and took a turn through it. Seeing that there was nothing here but ragged texts, he put them back without interest. But when he had walked to the end of the room, he suddenly gave a very quiet "Oh?"

Du Leng didn't understand what was happening. Fu Shen walked back and forth around the room several times, then frowned and said, "Come downstairs."

The two of them returned to the first floor, and he once again walked back and forth several times. Fu Shen tapped on each of the four walls in turn. Du Leng, seeing his brow tightly furrowed, couldn't resist asking, "General, what is it?"

"It's wrong," Fu Shen said. "Haven't you felt it? The second-floor room seems to be bigger than the first floor."

Du Leng shook his head in confusion.

Fu Shen said, "Count how many steps it takes to get from the door to this wall, then go to the second floor and count following the same path."

Du Leng did as he said. Shortly, he ran back in a hurry from the second floor, astonishment on his face. He said, "There's at least one extra step on the second floor! Could it be…?"

Fu Shen put up a finger in a silencing gesture.

He quietly instructed, "Go find General Wei. Tell him to bring a few people and bring some damp firewood."

* * *

Inside the interrogation office of the North Prison.

Chunyang-daozhang had yet to say a single word. In order to extract a confession, Yan Xiaohan and Tang Guo had spent nearly all day in the interrogation room. Someone hurriedly came in from outside and quietly said something to Yan Xiaohan.

"Understood." Yan Xiaohan turned his head and said to Tang Guo, "Doctor Shen needs me for something. You look after this for a while, I'm going out."

Tang Guo's eyes lit up when he heard the words "Doctor Shen," but when he found that it had nothing to do with him, he nodded glumly. Yan Xiaohan gestured with his chin at the prisoner hung up inside the cell and added, "It may have something to do with him. Take it easy, don't beat him to death."

The North Prison was only a few steps from the Feilong Guard's depot. As soon as Yan Xiaohan walked in, Shen Yice swirled toward him like a tornado. "Your Honor, there's a lead, it's Qingxu Temple! Those people who died in the saddle, including Yang Hexuan, their paths did cross, those people all went to Qingxu Temple!"

"Wh..." Yan Xiaohan jumped when he came over. "What did you say? Slow down, start from the beginning. What's going on?"

Shen Yice was so excited that his face was red. "I've spent the last few days trying to work out what that drug in Yang Hexuan's bag was, so I visited the family members of the victims. While their homes are scattered throughout the city, if you mark them on a map and compare them, you can see that their residences almost form a circle, with the area of Qingxu Temple at the center."

He spread out a map of the capital, indicating for Yan Xiaohan to look at the ink marks on it.

"Qingxu Temple has always had a name for effectiveness. People come in droves to light incense there. The people coming and going on each festival day and auspicious day are innumerable. Naturally no one would notice that all those people had gone to the same place. I asked the families of the victims. Those people really did go to Qingxu Temple periodically to light incense, and they often gave donations to the temple. As soon as those people showed symptoms of headache or mild fever, they would go to the temple to request talismans to be dissolved in water and elixirs, which would cure their illnesses as soon as they took them. If there really was such an effective medicine, what use would us doctors be? It's obvious that those people were having cravings, and they could only get the drug by going to Qingxu Temple."

Once the sequence of cause and effect was tied together, the overall shape of the matter became much clearer. Shen Yice said, "Because the palace thinks highly of the celestial way, the people also worship it, so no one thought there was anything particularly meaningful about this. Qingxu Temple took advantage of this prevailing attitude to secretly sell that drug. And there's no need to speak of Yang Hexuan. Chunyang-daozhang was recommended by his father."

Yan Xiaohan muttered briefly to himself with his eyes fixed on the map, then decisively stood and said, "Come on, we're going to Qingxu Temple."

When he hurriedly arrived at Qingxu Temple with some subordinates and heard that Fu Shen and Wei Xuzhou were both in the scripture library inside, Yan Xiaohan's right eyelid suddenly twitched uncomfortably.

An indescribable emotion assaulted his heart. He had no time to think it over. He charged swiftly toward the scripture library with his people. But before they had come near it, they already saw from afar the billowing smoke rising into the sky.

"Fu Shen!"

Fu Shen turned his head abruptly, just in time to meet his frightened and furious "humble wife" racing toward him.

At the same time, a loud clatter suddenly came from the smoke-filled scripture library. Then the double doors were kicked open from inside and a black figure, coughing again and again, covering his nose and mouth, charged out!

Yan Xiaohan had just reached Fu Shen and had yet to come to a full stop. But he saw Fu Shen, lightning-quick, pull Yan Xiaohan's sword from his waist and, without so much as turning his head, throw the sword backhanded. Like a bolt of white silk, the most dazzling light flashed, and with a clang the sword nailed that person to the pillars with a couple carved into them.

A subordinate brought a bucket of water and poured it over the constantly smoking damp firewood nearby. The flames were extinguished with a thump, and curling white steam spread outward, revealing the faces of the people in the courtyard, each wearing a different expression.

Amid a dead silence, Fu Shen took Yan Xiaohan's hand, icy with fright, and gently swung it. The gesture seemed comforting, and also had a trace of something like ingratiating himself with a job well done. "Look, that's the fish that slipped the net. I helped you catch him."

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

"YOU..." YAN XIAOHAN'S HEART WOULDN'T STOP BEATING wildly. That feeling of putting a foot wrong and losing his balance had yet to dissipate altogether. He glared at Fu Shen, so angry he stuttered. "You..."

Fu Shen's manner was very kind, very tender. "Yes. Go on."

Yan Xiaohan did not.

The saying went that you shouldn't hit a person who had already apologized, and that applied especially to a lofty beauty rarely willing to give people face like Fu Shen. Yan Xiaohan "you"ed for ages but still didn't manage to get a second word out. The dignity of the master of the house had completely hit rock bottom. So his towering rage changed course. He gave Wei Xuzhou a thorough scolding. "Why was there still someone in here? I told you to dig deep, not overlook so much as a rathole. How do you handle things? I sent you to take some people to watch Qingxu Temple, and what did you do? Huh? You've been making mischief with him!"

Wei Xuzhou was deeply aggrieved. "I, I..."

"You what!" Yan Xiaohan said sternly. "What if it hadn't been one person hiding in there but a whole band of villains?

Were you and your penny-ante force going to offer yourselves up for the slaughter?

"And you!" Having finally recovered his momentum in scolding, he turned to Fu Shen. "Going into danger alone. Before you went and made mischief, why didn't you stop to think about your position?! These aren't ordinary petty pilferers, they're desperate criminals who dared to attempt an assassination on His Majesty inside the imperial palace. If it had really come to a fight, with you unable to get around easily and these people hardly able to protect themselves, who would have been able to protect you?"

He was truly angry. Everyone in the vicinity involuntarily hunched their shoulders. Fu Shen said sincerely, "My wife's lecture is correct, I'll be sure to be careful in the future. I won't do it again."

Yan Xiaohan felt that Fu Shen hadn't heard half a word of it and his acknowledgment of wrongdoing was purely to humor a child. He was so angry his chest hurt, so he simply threw off Fu Shen's hand and shot him a cold glance. He said, "Clown."

Having said this, he proceeded to ignore him and walked straight toward the black-clothed man nailed to the pillar.

Fu Shen hadn't been told off in public for many years. He was stunned. His wrist remained hanging in the air, still in the posture of grabbing someone's hand. He unconsciously curled his fingers. As if suddenly waking with a start, he drew his hand back in front of his chest and fixed his eyes somewhat helplessly on Yan Xiaohan's back.

His impression was that he had practically never seen Yan Xiaohan truly angry. He was usually patient and restrained, and even when he was angry, he wouldn't vent it at him. Fu Shen suddenly realized that he was the one always being humored, believing himself blameless in the face of heaven, earth, and his own heart, always waiting for another to admit error and apologize so he could either take the opportunity to be lenient or ruthlessly make a clean break. Even if he was doing the humoring, he would never humble himself, only use sweet words and jokes to smooth the situation.

But when the day came that the accommodating person was no longer accommodating, the indulgent person was no longer indulgent, and there was no place for his glib tongue to be put to use, he finally learned the taste of being cast aside.

The whole scene was embarrassing, and no one was concerned about the person who had charged out of the scripture library. The people who knew the inside story were inwardly anxious, and the people who didn't know the truth were saying to themselves that these two people indeed didn't get along. Fu Shen had yet to decide how to handle the situation, but the matter was past, and the Feilong Guard was investigating a case. He thought that Yan Xiaohan probably wouldn't want him to stay here to get in the way.

He sighed and indicated to Du Leng that they were leaving. He said to Wei Xuzhou, "I'll be taking my leave..."

Before he could finish, as if he had eyes on the back of his head, Yan Xiaohan coldly said, "Going somewhere? Come here."

Fu Shen was confused. He stayed where he was, unmoving.

Yan Xiaohan turned his head to look back at him. He stood as if somewhat impatient and walked over to take the wheelchair from Du Leng's hands. He pushed Fu Shen in front of the pillars, away from the gazes of the crowd. His arms reached forward and tightly encircled Fu Shen from behind, wheelchair and all. He bent his head and quietly asked, "Where are you going? I just gave you a little scolding, and you're ready to pack your bags and go back home?"

Fu Shen said, "I'm not..."

Yan Xiaohan said, "Imagine it for yourself, if you were me and heard that you and Wei Xuzhou were in the scripture library and saw smoke billowing up to the sky from a distance, how would you feel?"

Fu Shen said, "I wasn't..."

Yan Xiaohan said, "You weren't inside, and you didn't light the fire yourself. But since you knew there was something wrong inside the building, why didn't you have someone go get me?"

Fu Shen didn't respond.

"Was I wrong to scold you?" Yan Xiaohan pinched his chin, forcing him to lift his head to look at him. "What if something happened to you? Would I survive? I know you're skilled in martial arts, but you have to admit that a person in a wheelchair can't get an advantage over a person who can walk normally. Jingyuan, for everything else, you do whatever you want, but when it comes to this kind of thing, don't just treat what I say like the wind blowing past your ear, and don't pretend to be obedient to humor me, all right?"

These words could well be called total devotion, nearly amounting to cutting out a slice of his own heart for him to look at. Fu Shen's throat stung. He hesitated briefly, then gruffly said, "I'm sorry."

Yan Xiaohan snorted a laugh and didn't respond. He only said, "Remember it. I'll square the account with you when we get home."

It was said that when a husband and wife fought at the head of the bed, they would make up at the foot of the bed. When it came to Yan Xiaohan, he didn't even give Fu Shen the chance to get to the foot of the bed; he pulled him right back on the spot. Wei Xuzhou didn't know what the two of them had said, but in the crack that Yan Xiaohan's body wasn't blocking, he seemed to see Fu Shen voluntarily lift his head.

General Wei, who was a married man, covered his eyes and pretended to see nothing while inwardly marveling.

Two sets of lips touched once and parted. Yan Xiaohan gently bit Fu Shen's lower lip with evil designs and, putting on a show of propriety, said, "Fine, let's get back to business. That attack of yours really wasn't meant to spare anyone's feelings."

His words had dispelled the anxiety in Fu Shen's heart. His body seemed to be slowly warming back up from its iciness. He was half a beat slow catching up to Yan Xiaohan suddenly changing the subject and didn't understand the latter part of what he had said. A little blank, he said, "What?"

The Feilong Guard had tied that man up. Yan Xiaohan pulled out the sword and lifted the man's head to show Fu Shen his face. "It's an old acquaintance of yours, but he's changed too much. You don't recognize him?"

Fu Shen stared for a while at that face so emaciated it was like a skull and said in astonishment, "Yi Siming?"

Riding out abreast to wander Mount Baoyan, the later collapse and fatal arrow at the Qingsha Gap, all the events of the past, everything fell into place at last in this moment of eyes locking in silence—one of them was gravely injured and unable to walk, the other had aged dramatically.

"General Yi, how long since we last met." Yan Xiaohan stepped sideways to block Fu Shen's line of sight and said with a fake smile, "I seem to recall the Jinwu Guard's depot isn't located here."

Yi Siming stared at him hatefully and hoarsely said, "Yan Xiaohan, don't celebrate so soon… Sooner or later, you'll share the same fate as Fu Shen."

"Don't put yourself to the trouble of worrying about his fate and mine. I think you'd be better off considering your own fate after you enter the North Prison," Yan Xiaohan said, returning his sword to its sheath. "Take him back."

"You dare!" Yi Siming began to struggle fiercely and loudly cried, "I am a third rank general of the Jinwu Guard. Without His Majesty's decree, you dare to arrest me?"

Yan Xiaohan, unmoved, said, "Qingxu Temple's Chunyang-daozhang attempted to assassinate His Majesty at the Vast Longevity Festival. All of Qingxu Temple's people are waiting in jail to be dealt with. With you squirreled away in the scripture library, who's to say that you aren't a traitor and a co-conspirator? I have received orders to lead this investigation. The Feilong Guard needs no imperial decree to arrest you."

"Slander and calumny!" Yi Siming shouted. "I had no idea that Chunyang was going to try to assassinate His Majesty! This has absolutely nothing to do with me!"

Yan Xiaohan smiled faintly. "Oh? Then what were you doing in this scripture library?"

It was as if someone had choked Yi Siming. He suddenly stopped talking. A long moment later, he finally said with difficulty, "I was just… looking around."

"Don't waste your effort concocting lies," Fu Shen suddenly spoke up. He calmly said, "The second floor of the scripture library is a full step narrower than the first floor. There must be another layer inside the wall of the first floor. This place is in a remote location and heaped with dust, but the steps are very clean, with no moss growing on them. It's clear someone comes here often, but they don't stay long inside. There's probably a secret room in this building. If it isn't behind the wall, then it's underground.

"The lock wasn't broken, so you must have gotten in through the window. You only got here a moment ahead of me. When you noticed that someone was approaching from outside, you hid inside the inner layer—maybe you originally meant to go into the secret room to get something. But very unluckily, because no one had been here recently, a layer of dust had accumulated on the floor of the scripture library, and you left behind a footprint, half outside the wall and half inside.

"I guessed that you hadn't left yet, so I had General Wei get some damp firewood and light it on fire. Whether it was a layer inside the wall or a hidden room, any place that would hide a person would have air holes. With smoke filling the scripture library, naturally it would also float in through the cracks and air holes. It's the traditional method of fumigating a cave to get rid of poisonous insects." He laughed softly. "As expected, not long after, you ran out right into the trap."

As he spoke, the first group of Feilong Guards who had gone inside to search had filed out. Shen Yice held a box in his hand.

"Your Honor, there's a staircase inside the wall leading down to a secret room underground. I figure that the secret room has already been cleaned out. We only found this."

He offered up the box. Yan Xiaohan opened it and took a look. He immediately understood. "A long-stemmed pipe?"

On the ground, Yi Siming suddenly began to writhe as though he had gone insane. "Give it to me! Give it to me!"

Fu Shen said in bewilderment, "What's this?"

Yan Xiaohan showed him the exquisite smoking set in the box and explained, "In the recent case of the dead Jinwu Guard, we suspected that he died in the saddle due to the effects of a drug. Most likely, Yi Siming also takes this drug. This drug is unprecedented. It comes in the form of brown powder. When inhaled after being heated over a flame, it makes a person feel brimming with vitality, with far more energy, but it is very harmful to the body and easy to become addicted to, and hard to stop taking."

Watching the uncontrollable drug craving of the seemingly frenzied Yi Siming, Fu Shen whispered, "He's become like this… because of that addictive drug?"

Yan Xiaohan lowered his gaze and looked at him.

He had guessed the truth behind the Qingsha Gap attack, and he understood Fu Shen and Yi Siming's past together when they were young. Therefore, as soon as this question was spoken, he grasped Fu Shen's unspoken subtext.

He was being softhearted, nostalgic, attempting to put the blame for all the great changes and the helplessness of recent years onto a drug that reached down to the bone and could make a person live in a dream.

Yan Xiaohan knew that these two had once been sworn friends. Yi Siming was steady and shrewd, but he had still willingly run the risk of sheltering those people from the Jin family for Fu Shen. And just yesterday, he had told Fu Shen, whether he wanted to take it up or let it go, no one could force him to take revenge.

But this time, he had to be cruel.

“The reason he has become like this isn’t because of a drug.” Yan Xiaohan put a hand on Fu Shen’s shoulder, making him look directly at Yi Siming. “It’s because of his bottomless greed.

“A wildly ambitious, perfidious person isn’t worth your pity.”

Eyes as calm as a still night met a pair of blood-red, protruding eyes. In that moment, they seemed to be standing at opposite ends from their high-spirited youth, separated by an endless landscape, casting a single distant glance, then parting company, never again to look back.

“You don’t have to take revenge, but you can never forget who injured you. Only by knowing pain can a person live longer.”

CHAPTER FORTY

YI SIMING, HEIR OF THE DUKE OF CHEN, FIRST GIVEN THE RANK of fourth rank captain in the Jinwu Guard, promoted through his efforts to General of the Left Jinwu Guard; he had been born to a wealthy and noble family, served in the emperor's presence, been viewed as a trusted aid by the emperor. His career as an official was a success, his future boundless.

Supposing he hadn't insisted on scheming to suppress the Feilong Guard, supposing he hadn't encountered Chunyang-daozhang, Yi Siming's life ought to have been a smooth, unbroken road. As long as he adhered strictly to his duty and didn't commit any heinous crimes, he could have lived out his whole life smoothly and without worries.

Such a pity.

"Yi Siming has already made a full confession. Using the identity of a Qingxu Temple Priest, you privately enticed people to take the drug known as 'white dew powder,' leading to the deaths of one Jinwu Guard and three hundred commoners, the only survivor being Yi Siming. The Feilong Guard recovered a box of smoking paraphernalia from the secret room beneath the scripture library, as well as a number of specially made lamps and a quantity of remaining drug. We have testimony and physical evidence. Daoist Chunyang, is there anything you want to say?"

The prison cell was silent and dim, with the smell of blood floating through the air. The quiet recitation of the *Dao De Jing* had at some point stopped.

The man dangling by his arms from a ceiling beam, seemingly soaked with blood from top to bottom, opened his sole remaining eye with difficulty. His gaze passed through the crowd and fell precisely on Fu Shen, who was in the shadows outside the cell.

His mouth slowly widened in a bone-chilling smile.

"Outside, is that the Marquis of Jingning Fu Shen… General Fu?" All of Chunyang-daozhang's teeth had been knocked out. Indistinctly, he demanded, "Ask him to come in."

Yan Xiaohan immediately felt regret. He'd known he shouldn't have brought Fu Shen to the Feilong Guard with them. Because of Yi Siming, his emotions must have been in an extremely bewildered state. Yan Xiaohan hadn't felt comfortable letting him go back to Yan Manor alone, and he had wanted to use Yi Siming's interrogation as an opportunity to give Fu Shen a clear understanding of what kind of person he was, so he would stop uselessly augmenting his sorrow for the sake of nostalgia.

They both occupied high positions, but Fu Shen had grown up as a child of nobility, in a privileged position; his field of vision had been wide, and moreover his temperament was magnanimous. So he had always been very lenient toward the offenses others gave. Yan Xiaohan meanwhile had climbed up step by step from the lowest levels of the imperial guard, encountering innumerable stumbling blocks along the way. If he hadn't been callous and vengeful, not a speck of his ashes would remain today.

Their life experiences dictated that the two of them would have totally different attitudes toward Yi Siming. Now Yan Xiaohan was attempting to shift Fu Shen over to his own side, but he didn't dare to push too hard, afraid that if he did, he would break him.

Now that Chunyang-daozhang had voluntarily asked to see Fu Shen, he began to worry again. Lord Yan had just this drop of fussiness, and all of it was directed at the Marquis of Jingning.

Fu Shen had sharp ears. Before Yan Xiaohan could make a decision, he rolled out of the shadows, pushing his own wheelchair, indicating for Yan Xiaohan to let him in.

"Careful…"

Before he could finish, Fu Shen patted the back of his hand comfortingly. "You're here, aren't you? Don't worry."

He'd really learned well—too well. These few words were some unknown magic potion; in an instant, Yan Xiaohan's whole heart was smoothed out. The warmth in his eyes seemed impossible to hide, rippling outward all at once.

He opened the door to the cell and let Fu Shen in.

Fu Shen didn't waste words with Chunyang-daozhang. He calmly said, "Go on."

Chunyang-daozhang gave a hoarse laugh. His tone was unexpectedly deferential and cooperative. "Where would you like me to start, general? From the time you received that broken arrow, or the time Yi Siming believed what Yang Hexuan said and came to Qingxu Temple to ask for drugs?"

Fu Shen seemed to have been suddenly pricked with a poisoned needle. His pupils contracted abruptly. "It was you?!"

Chunyang-daozhang's sole remaining eye lit up frighteningly, his sharp gaze shooting out from behind his unkempt hair. "General, I suppose you understand now? This is vengeance. Heaven's law is far-reaching. These are all fitting punishments for their crimes!"

It was like a sudden thunderclap reverberating in his mind. All the fragmentary clues came together into one complete picture. In this contest between him and Emperor Yuantai, there had always been a third person hiding in the shadows agitating the situation; now, he had finally floated to the surface.

It was only because that broken arrow that ought to have been buried deep had been sent to Fu Shen that he had followed the traces and found out the truth behind the attack in Qingsha Gap.

This person had always been silently observing his movements from behind, so when Fu Shen had been looking for Mu Boxiu, someone had just happened to "alert the enemy," making Mu Boxiu mistakenly believe that Yi Siming wanted to silence him and thus bite back, revealing Emperor Yuantai and Yi Siming's whole plan.

No wonder he'd always had a sense of being led around by the nose; no wonder it had been so easy once he had set about investigating the truth. It turned out that someone had gone ahead to part the mist for him and place the truth by the roadside, just waiting for him to bend down and pick it up.

"No wonder you wanted to assassinate His Majesty," Fu Shen whispered. "And then there's the white dew powder. From beginning to end, it was prepared solely because of Yi Siming..."

Daoist Chunyang contemptuously said, "Yi Siming's hatred for that Lord Yan next to you is profound. The South Yamen was in decline, the Jinwu Guard getting worse day by day. He disdained the Feilong Guard and coveted their grandeur, so he schemed and plotted to ingratiate himself with the emperor. Ha! Who would have thought that the mighty heir to a duke would in the end fall to being the emperor's dog!"

Fu Shen said, "So you had Yang Hexuan give him the white dew powder to take."

"Like dew and lightning, like dream and fantasy," Chunyang said spiritedly. "General Fu, do you know what kind of people are most likely to become addicted?

"The greedy, the lustful, the ambitious, the delusional, the paranoid, the narrow-minded... In a beautiful dream, they think that the whole world belongs to them, forget their worries, feel that there is nothing they cannot do.

"Then they wake from the dream, and the fantasy disperses.

They can't endure their own pettiness and incompetence, so they taste it again and again, living in a dream, until their internal organs are completely hollowed out and they become empty shells.

"White dew powder is also called 'soul-losing powder.' It's said that even the souls of those who take it will disappear." He laughed coldly. "These rapacious and unscrupulous things don't deserve to be called 'men.' They only deserve to be walking corpses."

Fu Shen suddenly said, "What about Yang Hexuan? You entered the palace on Yang Xu's recommendation, but you killed Yang Hexuan, so you not only aren't with the Yang family, you're their enemy. Why did you decide to tie yourself to the Yang family ship?"

The cell instantly fell silent. You could have heard a pin drop. All that remained was the sound of Chunyang-daozhang's heavy, labored breathing.

"Why have you stopped talking?" Fu Shen said. "Why did you want to lead me to discover the chief conspirator behind the Qingsha Gap? Why did you want to assassinate His Majesty? Why did you want to plot against Yi Siming? If I'm not unduly flattering myself, Daozhang, you've been scheming in order to get revenge for me. Are we acquainted?

"Or rather, what unbreakable bond is there between you and me—or you and the Fu family?"

His silence seemed more like a tacit acknowledgment. Fu Shen rolled his wheelchair and slowly came up in front of him. "Judging from your reaction, is there some profound hatred between the Yang family and the Fu family that I don't yet know about?"

Chunyang-daozhang gazed fixedly at him in silence. Then, suddenly, he broke out into loud laughter.

This was frenzied laughter fit to break a person's liver and gall, permeated with satisfaction and defiance, hoarse as iron sand grinding together. The arrogance on that mangled face couldn't be hidden. At one moment, Fu Shen actually thought that there was something inexplicably familiar about him.

But as he laughed and laughed, a trickle of blood snaked down from the corner of his mouth.

"In the twelfth year of Yuantai, the Eastern Tartars and the Zhe Clan united to invade the Central Plains. In the Battle of Gushan Pass, General Fu Tingxin found himself surrounded, caught between two enemies. The Beiyan Cavalry had requested reinforcements from Tangzhou's forces, and Tangzhou's military commissioner Yang Xu, because of the Fu family's unwillingness to send their daughter to the Eastern Palace, harbored deep resentment and chose to take revenge. He held back, unwilling to dispatch soldiers, ultimately resulting in General Fu dying in battle.

"Every day the Yang traitor drags out his miserable existence is another day that General Fu's brave spirit cannot be at peace. The debt of blood runs deep. There can be no reconciliation—"

Fu Shen put a hand around his neck.

Yan Xiaohan burst out, "Jingyuan!"

Fu Shen's expression was frighteningly cold, his gaze like a knife. Each word was squeezed out between clenched teeth. "My uncle has been dead six years. Why have you waited this long to take revenge?"

Chunyang rasped, "When Yang Xu sat watching the fires burn across the river, he delayed until the Beiyan Army's main force, retreating in defeat, arrived. There wasn't a single survivor from those who knew the details at the time. If not for the Qingsha Gap incident, when we caught a horse thief in Yuanzhou who had once served under Yang Xu and confessed all those past events as soon as he heard 'Beiyan Cavalry,' Yang Xu would have continued holding is reputation built on a lie. How could the thousands of brave spirits buried in the Gushan Pass have been able to rest in peace?"

"'We?'" Fu Shen said. "You and who else?"

Blood spilled in gout after gout from the man's nose and mouth, flowing down onto Fu Shen's hand with its prominent muscle and bone, soaking his sleeve in mottled bloodstains.

"I can't say…"

"Bullshit." Fu Shen laughed coldly in utter rage. "You underwent the worst torture in the North Prison and were unwilling to speak, but as soon as I came, you were only too eager to confess everything. Weren't you specifically waiting for me? Talk!"

Chunyang-daozhang's face was red and swollen, his chest undulating violently. Yan Xiaohan threw himself forward and grabbed Fu Shen's hand. "Jingyuan, let go! You're going to choke him to death!"

"Scram!" Fu Shen furiously threw him off. His fingers tightened, fingertips seeming to sink into that person's flesh. "Don't you fucking play dead! Talk! Who are you? Who is the person behind you?"

The single eye beneath the messy hair met the young general's chilly gaze. Fu Shen distinctly saw that a tear seemed to flash in that eye.

"… Eldest young master, my hands are stained with blood. I have willfully slaughtered the innocent and know my own sins to be unpardonable. When I reach the netherworld, I will be ashamed to face my former comrades. I am a nameless foot soldier. There is no need for you to ask my name again…"

Fu Shen instantly understood.

Chunyang-daozhang had once served in the Beiyan Cavalry, and he had served at the same time as his father and Second Uncle. Because only those people would ignore his current position and call him "eldest young master." And once his identity was revealed, the Beiyan Cavalry and Fu Shen would all be dragged into a vortex.

So he had to die.

"Wang Gou'er" and his family, killed without cause; the other commoners he had used to try out the drug—one blood debt after another wouldn't disappear even with his death.

Chunyang-daozhang struggled until his strength was spent.

His eyes protruded, blood and tears mixed. Only his lips moved weakly. His breath came as thin as gossamer. Apart from Fu Shen, no one heard what he said.

There came the crisp crack of snapping bone. The man's head fell limply.

Fu Shen looked away indifferently, an unspeakable gloom about him. His pale hand dripped with fresh blood, like a god of death who had walked out of hell.

"The Daoist sorcerer Chunyang colluded with a court official and used the pretext of presenting a golden elixir pill at the Vast Longevity Festival to attempt to murder His Majesty; that is his first crime. He illicitly manufactured the drug 'white dew powder' and did injury to the Jinwu Guard's General Yi Siming, Yang Hexuan, a captain in the Jinwu Guard, and numerous others; that is his second crime. This criminal, knowing that his crimes were unpardonable and he could not escape death, committed suicide from dread of punishment today at one o'clock."

He calmly asked, "Is that good enough, Lord Yan?"

Before he could get an answer, Fu Shen turned his wheelchair and left the prison cell, consulting no one.

The moment he left the North Prison, his figure seemed to be instantly swallowed up by the daylight pouring down.

A Beiyan Cavalry soldier who had once marched across battlefields unhindered had assumed a false identity, traveled like a wraith through the capital's streets and alley. White dew powder had quietly melted amid the evening drums and morning bells of Qingxu Temple, the decadent fragrance condensing into a thin blade that killed bloodlessly.

And the last words he had said to Fu Shen were—"Kill me."

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

FU SHEN DIDN'T WAIT FOR ANYONE; CONSULTING NO ONE, HE simply left. Yan Xiaohan had a mind to go after him, but while Chunyang-daozhang was dead, how to wrap up this case, how to make up testimony, how to smooth over the sequence of cause and effect... all remained for him to clean up.

Fortunately, he had cleared the scene in advance during the interrogation. Only he and Fu Shen had heard Chunyang-daozhang's last words. But even so, Yan Xiaohan was still worried. He gave his subordinates a strict order to hold their tongues, not let a drop of what had happened today leak out.

While the Feilong Guard were the emperor's eyes and ears, matters having reached this stage, it was no longer in His Majesty's power to choose whether to hear or not, see or not.

Supposing it really had been Yang Xu deliberately delaying, dragging his feet on sending reinforcements, that had led to Fu Tingxin dying in battle, this earth-shattering major case would completely alter Fu Shen and the Beiyan Cavalry's positions, even influence the structure of court. Yang Xu was Empress Yang's big brother, a major aid to the crown prince. Now, because of the assassination attempt at the Vast Longevity Feast, the empress was dead, and the remaining two had been knocked down from the high clouds. One more careless slip, and the emperor would depose the crown prince without hesitation.

Regardless of whether Emperor Yuantai knew the inside story, Fu Shen presumably no longer wanted to see him on the throne.

A succession struggle was inevitable under the circumstances. And Fu Shen held Beiyan's military authority. For whoever he wanted to push up onto the throne, inheriting power over the empire would be practically a settled matter.

Looking at it from the standpoint of common sense, he would be most likely to choose Prince Qi, but Yan Xiaohan had always thought that Fu Shen wasn't close to Prince Qi; instead, it seemed that he was always avoiding suspicion, not wishing to incur the infamy of "a prince making friends with an important minister."

Yan Xiaohan ordered Chunyang-daozhang's body cleaned up, then enclosed Yi Siming's confession in a file. He organized the file and used it along with the records from the Yang Hexuan case, writing a memorial to the throne winding up the case.

Daoist Chunyang, name unknown, background unknown, entered the capital in the twenty-second year of Yuantai and lodged in the capital's Qingxu Temple. For years he illicitly created the drug known as "white dew powder" and traded with the merchants and commoners in the area, and also used dishonest rhetoric to deceive the Jinwu Guard's Captain Yang Hexuan, claiming that this drug had the effect of increasing mental clarity and improving vitality. He also presented the "white dew powder" to a high official, resulting in the unfortunate injury of the former Jinwu Guard commander Yi Siming, who took the drug and became addicted.

It just so happened that this coincided with Emperor Yuantai being in poor health. Through Yang Hexuan's introduction, Tangzhou's military commissioner Yang Xu recommended Daoist Chunyang to enter the palace, where he remained long-term receiving support due to the efficacy of his elixir pills. Later, when events at Kunning Palace transpired, Yang Xu, in order to protect the empress and her child, did not stint to take the risk of plotting with Daoist Chunyang to assassinate the emperor while presenting an elixir pill at *the Vast Longevity Feast. Fortunately the Marquis of Jingning Fu Shen was vigilant and intervened in time, keeping the poisoned needles of the rebels and traitors from prevailing.*

After the event transpired, Daoist Chunyang committed suicide through dread of receiving punishment in the interrogation department. Yi Siming confessed the matter of the "white dew powder" and afterward, due to an attack of drug craving, went insane and died biting his own tongue.

Only Yang Xu made a full confession. The crime of plotting rebellion is a wickedness beyond redemption. The punishment according to law is beheading.

After the dossier and the memorial were sent up, Emperor Yuantai got to work despite his illness. On the conviction notice presented by the Ministry of Justice, he used a brush dipped in red ink to slap down a heavy "to be executed publicly by cutting in half at the waist" on the edict document.

At this point, the dust finally settled in the cases of the Jinwu Guard and the Vast Longevity Feast, which had shaken the capital.

And the truth of the attack on the Eastern Tartar diplomatic mission, which had long since faded from memory, silently emerged, and, with Chunyang-daozhang's death, was silently covered up and left unmentioned by those with an agenda.

But those are later matters. That day, after he had written the memorial, Yan Xiaohan tossed aside his brush and hurried home. The first words out of his mouth when he walked in were, "Where is the Lord Marquis?"

A maid said, "In the bedroom. He hasn't left it since coming back in the afternoon."

Yan Xiaohan's heart lurched. He followed up, "Was there anything wrong with him?"

The maid shook her head in confusion. "There was nothing unusual. He only said he did not want to be disturbed. The Lord Marquis doesn't seem to be in a very good mood? But it doesn't seem to be as bad as last time."

Yan Xiaohan became even more worried.

For the average person receiving such a shock, collapsing, venting, and even bursting into tears would all be normal reactions. Even if Fu Shen were forged of iron, he still couldn't keep all his feelings hidden in his heart, not letting a drop leak out, slowly digesting them. The calmer he was, the greater the trouble. Yan Xiaohan would rather have seen him cry, throw a tantrum, and threaten to hang himself; he was afraid of Fu Shen shutting himself off and getting stuck in an insoluble dilemma, injuring his mental and physical wellbeing.

He stood in front of the bedroom door, making ready to be refused and break down the door. He raised his hand and knocked. "Jingyuan?"

Fu Shen's answer came quickly: "Come in."

Yan Xiaohan was startled. He opened the door and went in. The lamp in the door hadn't been lit. It was dim in the twilight. Fu Shen was sitting by the window, staring emptily at the remaining glow of the setting sun.

Once he went in, Fu Shen turned his head and said, "You don't normally knock before entering. Why so formal today?"

"Huh?" Yan Xiaohan said hesitantly. "You..."

Fu Shen laughed. "So careful. Are you worried that I'm in a bad mood, or afraid that I'm taking this too hard?"

Not one of the scenes that Yan Xiaohan had envisaged had taken place. Fu Shen had in fact repeatedly pondered today's events, but he really was calm, neither forcing himself to look happy nor deliberately acting relaxed.

"Sit." Fu Shen casually pointed to a stool next to him. When Yan Xiaohan was seated across from him, he said, "There's no need to worry about me. While the 'truth' Chunyang spoke of in prison today was horrifying to hear, it was a statement from only one of the parties involved. Its credibility isn't high. It will require further investigation."

Yan Xiaohan absolutely hadn't expected him to be calm to this degree. He didn't quite dare to believe his own ears and suspected that this was also a sign of insanity. "Jingyuan..."

"Don't look at me like that," Fu Shen said in exasperation. "I'm not delirious. Yan-xiong, you've interrogated hundreds upon thousands of prisoners in the Feilong Guard. Do you still believe that a man speaks the truth on the point of death?

"Anyway, I don't believe it anymore." He laughed in self-mockery. "You can say that I'm cold-blooded. During my years in Yanzhou, I've interrogated Eastern Tartars and Zhe, and I've interrogated Han. There are those who cling to life and fear death who give everything up when you give them a little scare, but the majority keep making things up until they die, attempting to use themselves as bait and drag others into the grave with them."

Yan Xiaohan suddenly realized that Fu Shen's experiences were completely different from the average person's. He had been plunged again and again into the most extreme of situations without warning, been honed for many years on the battlefield, where everything could change in the space of a breath; he wouldn't turn a hair with all the weight of Mount Tai pressing down on his head. The higher the waves billowed in front of him, the more his tenacity and cool would be beyond imagining.

Unexpectedly, he recalled a figure in the torrential rain. That day, even he had been on the brink of losing control, but Fu Shen had still composedly said, "When a gentleman conducts himself in society, there are actions he takes and actions he must not take."

A temperament of black iron, a heart of ice and snow.

Fu Shen could still go on to make a detailed analysis: "It may be true that Yang Xu deliberately delayed in sending reinforcements during the Battle of Gushan Pass, but he didn't have the greatest impact on the outcome of the battle. I don't know whether Chunyang-daozhang didn't realize it or whether he was deliberately obscuring primary and secondary causes. After my uncle died in battle, the most tenacious person wasn't me, but His Highness Prince Su. We have both come to conclusions about the Battle of Gushan Pass. Even if Yang Xu's Tangzhou forces had arrived in time, they still wouldn't have been able to save my uncle. They could only have come in time for the closing. And even though Yang Xu delayed, he still controlled himself and remained within the scope of not arousing suspicion—at least Prince Su and I saw nothing unusual. Had he been too unsubtle, Prince Su would have slaughtered him by now. He wouldn't have let him drag out his miserable existence this long.

"Also, he inadvertently mentioned a 'we.' Qingsha Gap, Mu Boxiu, the white dew powder, the Vast Longevity Feast—none of those things could have been accomplished by a single person. I feel that there is a big net in the capital. Chunyang-daozhang was only a game piece. It's the person behind him holding the pieces who is the crux.

"As for the final reason, I only have my own guess. You can hear it out for the time being. It may not be right," Fu Shen said. "The white dew powder drug is too evil. Once it spreads, it will cause no end of trouble. And Chunyang-daozhang, in order to cover his tracks, killed the whole three-person family of a child he had deliver his message for him. And then there are the innocent commoners who died because of the white dew powder. If he had really served in the Beiyan Cavalry and had been my uncle's subordinate, these tactics would be too vicious.

"I have a feeling that not only Chunyang-daozhang, but also the person behind him, considering their conduct and style, seem more like former subordinates of my late father."

Yan Xiaohan said, "... Aren't you being a little disrespectful to my father-in-law by speaking like this?"

Fu Shen sneered. "When my late father was alive, he often said that I was softhearted, made in the same mold as my Second Uncle. How benevolent do you think he was?"

Yan Xiaohan didn't answer.

After a while, he finally said, "Since you don't believe Chunyang-daozhang, why did you kill him with your own hands?"

This question gave Fu Shen pause. Then, not especially moved, he said, "He served in the Beiyan Cavalry. If I didn't throttle him, was I supposed to wait for him to drag me under?"

Yan Xiaohan suddenly stood and drew close to pinch his forearm. The sharp pain exploded. Fu Shen's muscles tensed instantly. But for some reason, he didn't dodge.

"Does it hurt?" said Yan Xiaohan.

Fu Shen was bewildered. "Obviously. Why don't I pinch you so you can have a try?"

"It had better hurt." Yan Xiaohan stood in front of him and opened his arms slightly. This was an entirely tolerant posture. His eyes were aimed at Fu Shen's. "Remember it. You are a living, breathing person, not something made of iron and stone."

Chunyang-daozhang had been indiscriminate in his methods, scheming and calculating, but everything he had done had been for Fu Shen's sake, and for his family martyrs behind him and all the spirits of the brave departed.

There were still people who remembered the departed loyal souls, still people acting for him, spilling their very last drop of blood for him.

The Beiyan soldiers all shared an origin. Even if they had never met, separated by time, Fu Shen still knew that this was his comrade, so he had helped Chunyang-daozhang achieve his aim.

All calm analyses were built outside of emotions. Only by setting aside his position and using all of his reason to seek out points of suspicion could Fu Shen manage to force himself to forget the tears that had flashed in Chunyang-daozhang's eyes.

But after all, he wasn't built of iron and stone.

After an interval of blank staring, Fu Shen's ramrod-straight back finally fell. Then, without a word, he leaned forward slightly and buried his face in Yan Xiaohan's embrace.

Two hands landed gently on his back.

"The Beiyan Army has guarded the border for nearly twenty years. So many people have left their bones buried in the north, but all they've gotten in return has been unwarranted suspicion," he whispered. "My uncle fought to the death, while vile people of Yang Xu's likes are running amok in court to this day. Even taking vengeance requires the lives of the Beiyan soldiers…"

"Don't be too grieved." Yan Xiaohan hugged him tightly and said quietly, "Look, no matter what happens, tens of thousands of Beiyan soldiers will always stand behind you.

"—And so will I."

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

YAN XIAOHAN STOOD THERE QUIETLY HUGGING HIM FOR A WHILE, both wishing to give him support and afraid that he would be overly grieved. So he patted Fu Shen on the shoulder and, deliberately teasing, said, "Lord Marquis, are you crying? Should I cheer you up?"

Of course Fu Shen couldn't let himself wallow in gloom too long. It was only that the times he could lean on another person were rare. He was a little unwilling to get up. In a muffled voice, he said, "Get out. Is there wine at home? Drink a couple of goblets with me."

His tone didn't sound like an invitation to drink between husband and wife but rather like the master of the house summoning his son to relieve his boredom. Yan Xiaohan didn't know whether to laugh or cry. He was just about to blurt out, "You can't drink wine," but suddenly changed his mind. Supposing he could drown his sorrows in drink, giving him a chance to vent his feelings to his heart's content would still beat keeping everything in his heart like he was now.

"There is," he said directly. "Wait a moment, I'll have someone bring some."

Fu Shen raised his head in astonishment. "What's the matter with you? You're being so accommodating!"

Yan Xiaohan raised his eyebrows and drew close to ask, "Are you telling me I haven't been accommodating before? Lord Marquis, consult your conscience. When have you ever asked for anything that I haven't agreed to?"

His tall figure gradually drew close, but unexpectedly there was no sense of oppression. Fu Shen put a finger against his chest, which was slowly pressing down, and said with a smile, "Here I thought I could only get a mouthful of wine in exchange for some benefit. Since you're so sensible and considerate, things couldn't be better."

Yan Xiaohan wouldn't let him off. He asked, "What benefit?"

Fu Shen smiled without answering.

Yan Xiaohan said, "No gratitude for good intentions? Lord Marquis, that doesn't seem like the conduct of a gentleman."

"Then what do you want?" Fu Shen asked in turn.

"Since I'm so 'sensible,' and show so much initiative," he said, meaningfully prodding Fu Shen's leg with his knee, "shouldn't you give me some greater inducement?"

Fu Shen cast a glance below his belt and smirked. "Hey, spring is here."

Yan Xiaohan felt no shame but instead felt pride. He advanced even further and said something right into his ear, drawing a laugh from Fu Shen, who said, "Go on. We'll see whether that third leg of yours is as hard as your bones. Let's agree ahead of time, don't cry if it breaks."

Yan Xiaohan was speechless.

"Hey, the heart of a thief but not the guts of a thief, and you still won't let it go." Fu Shen pinched his chin and kissed his lips. Languidly, he said, "Why don't you just be good and lie back? I guarantee you'll feel as though you were in paradise and come back for more. How about it?

"Sir."

A man's voice was deep, not as coquettish as a woman's voice, but coming from his mouth, it had a particular bewitching allure. There was a deep light in Yan Xiaohan's eyes. Maintaining the posture of someone being seduced, he said lightly, "At least I have three legs. Your third leg is all you have..."

The charming atmosphere instantly dissipated. Fu Shen couldn't resist—he nearly slapped him. But Yan Xiaohan caught him off his guard and gained the advantage. He pressed him back against the chair and firmly kissed him.

When the lengthy kiss ended, Fu Shen's head drooped, and he panted for breath. Finally, Yan Xiaohan said in a very soft voice, "Not now, but I want you."

A corner of the gentle and controlled mask seemed to have finally broken off, revealing the bare-fanged, claw-brandishing possessiveness within. This desire wasn't especially pretty, but it was his truest aspect.

Fu Shen's chest undulated constantly. Even seated, he felt that his legs had gone weak. He thought to himself, *Want all you like, you inveterate troublemaker. Sooner or later I'll fuck you until you cry and say, "No more."*

But what he said was, "Fine, fine, whatever you want... Good gege, get up already, you're crushing me."

Yan Xiaohan found that every time Fu Shen felt embarrassed, he would find all kinds of excuses to drive him away. This tiny discovery inexplicably pleased him, so he let Fu Shen go in satisfaction and went out to request wine on his behalf.

Fu Shen listened to his footsteps briskly recede into the distance. He raised a hand and touched his sore, overheated lips and unconsciously smiled.

He had always been reliable, filling the role of consoling others. For the first time he had become the one deriving a sense of security and found that he could have someone to lean on; it felt both wonderful and indescribable.

Leaving aside that he had to pretend to be crippled, even though Fu Shen's legs were actually better, they still couldn't take much weight in the short term. But when two grown men full of vigor and vitality spent all day fooling around at close quarters, some reaction arising was unavoidable. Was he really supposed to stand keeping to such "respect and consideration" between them for another two or three years?

Thinking about it that way, giving way to him didn't seem all that impossible...

While Yan Xiaohan poured wine for Fu Shen, he kept thinking that Fu Shen was watching him with some profound meaning in his gaze, as if he had picked up some money while walking, and that money had been dropped by Fu Shen.

The wine was sweet and not strong, its fragrance agreeable. Fu Shen knocked back the wine in his cup in one gulp and praised, "Good wine," then said mockingly, "This wine is hard to come by. As an official, I suppose that Lord Yan must receive quite a few gifts paying respects to you from subordinates?"

In official circles, some bribes to smooth along relationships between higher and lower ranks were nothing out of the ordinary, especially when it came to a highly important Yamen like the Feilong Guard. Yan Xiaohan neither confirmed nor denied. He only said, "When it comes to paying my respects to the Lord Marquis, how could I dare to use ordinary wine? Of course I have to pick the best."

Fu Shen popped a pine nut into his mouth and suddenly said, "While the wine is good, it doesn't amount to the best."

Yan Xiaohan didn't show his heroic spirit. He only drank slowly and said, "Do go on."

Fu Shen looked askance at him with a not-quite-smile. "The best wine I've ever drunk was in a small town near the border in Beiyan. The wine was strong, and the proprietress was nice."

As expected, he managed to step on Yan Xiaohan's tail. Sourly, he said, "Was it the wine you liked or the proprietress?"

His posture seemed to be saying, *Just you dare try stepping out right in front of my face.*

Fu Shen said, "Mellow wine and an old acquaintance, revisiting the past. The wine doesn't intoxicate, but one intoxicates oneself."

Yan Xiaohan instantly wanted to stray from the subject. "And you have a past with her?"

He really hadn't thought of the possibility that Fu Shen would encounter Caiyue. In the vast sea of people, how could it be so easy for two people with different futures to meet again? Yan Xiaohan had never felt wronged on this account. In his heart, even though he had let Caiyue go in the end, the wrong had already been done, and Fu Shen had already broken with him. No matter how he remedied it, he couldn't pretend that that knife to the back had never existed.

Seeing that Yan Xiaohan still hadn't understood, Fu Shen didn't illuminate further. He had been behaving underhandedly in this matter, as if he had caught Yan Xiaohan out in being secretly in love with him. He couldn't resist surreptitiously probing, both looking forward to his expression after it was revealed and wanting to make him admit it himself.

"I'm teasing you. I only have so many events in my past. Which of them don't involve you?" Like a leering lecher, Fu Shen pinched his cheek. "No one is as nice as you. You're the nicest."

Yan Xiaohan knew perfectly well that his honeyed words couldn't be trusted, but he was still soothed in spite of himself, humored into submission.

Two goblets of wine clinked together with a crisp sound. Fu Shen knocked his back in one gulp. Yan Xiaohan saw an opening and struck, putting food into his bowl. "Take it easy. However good the wine, you can't drink it like this."

Fu Shen indolently said, "Don't worry. My alcohol tolerance is excellent. If you're afraid I'll get drunk and disturb you, I'll go sleep in the guest room."

"Don't you feel guilty saying that, Lord Marquis?" Yan Xiaohan said indifferently. "Starting from the very first day, when have I ever let you go to the guest room?"

Fu Shen sheepishly said, "… That's because you're too conscientious."

Yan Xiaohan said, "Hmph."

"It's true that a child gets harder to mind the older he gets," Fu Shen said with a put-on sigh. "Before you were talking about 'liking me best,' and now it's just 'hmph.'"

Yan Xiaohan's efforts immediately fell through.

When the two of them had had enough of trading childish remarks, they finally took the time before the wine went to their heads, while they were tipsy yet unusually clear-headed, to speak about Daoist Chunyang.

"We have to investigate further. I won't feel easy until we've uncovered the person behind him," Fu Shen said. "Not just because of my Second Uncle. I'm afraid that with his assassination attempt having failed once, he'll want to try again. Then there's the 'white dew powder.' If it isn't controlled, it will ferment sooner or later into a great disaster."

Yan Xiaohan said, "If he were gone, you wouldn't be trapped in the capital anymore."

"Anyone in that position would fear me," Fu Shen said. "Even if you were in his place. That isn't the crucial matter. The crucial matter is that none of the princes can undertake serious responsibility. Don't forget that our old neighbors are still watching. While His Majesty is severely paranoid, his attitude toward border affairs has always been tough. At present, only he can hold back the neighboring countries on all sides.

"Ignoring the crown prince, Prince Jin and Prince Qi are both very close with civilian officials. Think about it, the generals scattered to the four points, the five great capital barracks, and your imperial guards—which of them isn't tightly held by His Majesty?

"As soon as the throne changes hands, no matter who is enthroned in the end, he still won't be able to obtain the support of a majority of court officials in the short term. He will have a hard time keeping foreigners from taking advantage of the vacancy to invade. When the Beiyan Cavalry bears the brunt of it, who will I go to to reason with?"

Yan Xiaohan thought about it and decided that he was right. "But Chunyang is dead. Which direction are you planning to investigate in?"

"The southwest," Fu Shen said, drinking a mouthful of wine. "I said before that Chunyang's style makes it seem like he was my late father's subordinate. Of the high-ranking officers who fought with my late father and uncle at the northern border, the only one still living and in good health is Commandery Prince Xiping."

Yan Xiaohan said, "Commandery Prince Xiping, Duan Guihong?"

"Yes," Fu Shen said. "The sole military officer not of the imperial family to be conferred the title of commandery prince during the current reign. While pacifying the northern border in the second year of Yuantai, he was also under my grandfather's command, then later was transferred to the southwest. He has stood guard there for over a decade. I've heard that his friendship with my late father and uncle was quite deep. He may still have some impression of what happened back then."

Yan Xiaohan said, "You said before that Daoist Chunyang was only a piece on the game board. Commandery Prince Xiping is far away in Xinan. Reasonably speaking, it would be very hard for him to operate a large-scale force in the capital. This probably has nothing to do with him."

Fu Shen sighed. "If I knew whom it had to do with, would I be sitting here drowning my sorrows in wine? Apart from him, I can't for the time being think of anyone else who would care so much about the Beiyan Cavalry's affairs. And you examine yourself. You haven't found the source of the white dew powder yet. What do you Feilong Guards do to earn your keep?"

Yan Xiaohan saw indications that he was already a little drunk, because he had begun to be completely unreasonable, so he put down his cup and picked up the wine pot, planning to call it off here and send Fu Shen to wash up and go to sleep.

But when he checked, he found that the pot was empty!

While they had been speaking, without Yan Xiaohan noticing the frequency with which he raised cups, Fu Shen had actually drunk up over half the pot without a sound.

Yan Xiaohan's scalp went numb and said a silent prayer for Fu Shen's alcohol tolerance to be good so he wouldn't make trouble while drunk. It wasn't that he was afraid. It was just that if Fu Shen really did attack him, he wouldn't be able to beat him.

The alcohol surged up, his head became murky, and Fu Shen's eyes half closed. He peacefully allowed Yan Xiaohan to help him change clothes and bathe. All the way to bed, he was very well-behaved and docile.

Yan Xiaohan's heart came down from his throat bit by bit. While he sighed in relief, he thought that it was a little understimulating to be missing the "drunken sex" part of the program.

Before that thought could leave his head, the drunkard suddenly called something out in a low voice. Yan Xiaohan didn't hear it clearly. He leaned down and asked, "What's—"

With a crash, the world turned upside down.

When he came back to his senses, he was being held down by Fu Shen on the inner side of the bed. The person on top of him had both hands beside Yan Xiaohan's head. His drunken eyes were slightly narrowed. He was looking loftily down on him from above. "Throwing yourself into my arms, hm?"

Yan Xiaohan quickly put his arms around his waist. "Be careful with your legs! Don't kneel, get down!"

With his arms closing tight around him, Fu Shen's posture changed from kneeling to lying on him, planting his head right into the hollow of his neck. But he still wouldn't rest. He had to get up and look at his face.

Yan Xiaohan said helplessly, "Jingyuan, don't fool..."

"A-Han."

He froze instantly, thinking that he had heard wrong. He asked in disbelief, "What did you call me?"

"A-Han." Fu Shen gently kissed the tip of his nose, then moved to the corner of his lips. "A-Han..."

This form of address was more effective even than strong drink. Yan Xiaohan felt his whole body begin to burn.

But Fu Shen had a follow-up. Though it was indistinct and hoarse, his voice was full of tenderness. "... Don't move, be good. Gege will love you."

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

SO MANY ENCHANTING FEELINGS, ALL OF THEM SCATTERED BY these words. A breath caught in Yan Xiaohan's throat. He choked for a long moment, thoroughly losing his temper.

He had finally worked it out. Fu Shen only spoke nicely, strong on the outside but weak on the inside. In reality he didn't understand a thing. He was still using moves for seducing little girls on him.

Why didn't he open his eyes and take a look, see whether the person under him was a little lamb who would meekly submit to insult or a wild beast hiding sharp teeth, holding himself in restraint.

Fu Shen was still speaking into his ear, affectionately coaxing him, but Yan Xiaohan no longer felt the earlier throb of nearly losing control. He only thought he looked adorable like this and couldn't resist playing around and teasing him.

So he adjusted his position slightly, letting Fu Shen lie down more comfortably, pretending that he really had been subdued. "Say it again, all right?"

Fu Shen accordingly said, "A-Han."

But Yan Xiaohan said, "Not that."

"Then what do you want me to call you?" Fu Shen laughed, his drunken eyes hazy. Tender affection clung to his features, lighting the whole room with a dazzling glow. "Sweetheart… lovely living flower…?"

Yan Xiaohan couldn't help laughing.

He raised his head to receive Fu Shen's light and intimate pecking kiss, using one hand to smooth his loose hair. Still unsatisfied, he demanded, "None of those, it has to be what you called me before."

Fu Shen was confused. "What did I call you?"

There was a vast emptiness in Fu Shen's mind. How could he remember what he had said before? There was in fact in his character a tendency to get stuck on things, it just wasn't obvious normally. But when he was drunk, that characteristic would be immediately magnified. This question stopped him in his tracks. He simply tossed Yan Xiaohan aside and began to rack his brains.

Yan Xiaohan, holding back laughter, said, "Ask me, I'll tell you."

Fu Shen had great strength of character. "No need. Out of the way."

"You won't ask me?" His hand slid into his clothes, pressing against his back to slowly stroke and massage, making Fu Shen's brow knit involuntarily. It felt good, but there was a peculiar warmth.

"You really don't want to know?" Yan Xiaohan guided him patiently: "You said before, who was going to love me?"

As expected, Fu Shen was lured in by his words. He murmured indistinctly, "Gege…"

Had Lord Yan really had a tail, it would have been sticking up to the sky now. He coaxed, "Louder, I didn't hear you clearly."

It had been many years since Fu Shen had called to anyone like this. Though he was drunk, he still felt ashamed. He stalled, unwilling to speak. Yan Xiaohan feigned displeasure. "You were seducing me before, and now you won't even call to me. Are you planning to love me and leave me?"

In Fu Shen's eyes, the person beneath him had reddened eyes, with affection written on his features, his brows slightly knit, his thin lips pressed slightly together—clearly the appearance of someone who had been subject to an excess of seduction. His heart immediately softened, with pity and with love. He thought there really was nothing he could do about this little siren.

Anyway, you couldn't believe anything a man said in bed. So Fu Shen magnanimously compromised. "Honestly... You have to insist on those two years? You're gege, all right? Gege, A-Han-gege, Menggui-gege, which one do you like?"

Even after so many years, being called "gege" was enough to instantly turn Yan Xiaohan's heart limp and soft.

"Silly thing." Burning with passion, like a wild beast released from a cage, he held Fu Shen's waist and abruptly rolled over, his gaze suddenly turning deep and dark. "Be good, gege will love you."

The next morning, Fu Shen sat up in bed with a hangover headache, watching Yan Xiaohan coldly.

Not beating him when he was drunk didn't mean he wouldn't beat him once he had sobered up.

Yan Xiaohan thought to himself that it was great luck he hadn't really gone to that stage last night. He hoped that their first time would be completely willing, not taking advantage of another's weakened position. Therefore, last night, he had only taken advantage of a surge of passion to ease the tension. Fu Shen could feel that, of course. That murderous expression of his now was mainly anger that he had taken advantage of his drunkenness to trick him into calling him "gege" several times.

"All right, all right, don't be angry." Yan Xiaohan, brooking no argument, hugged him, lying in bed a while longer as long as the sun hadn't risen yet. Shamelessly acting spoiled, he said, "Why take matters of conjugal pleasure so seriously? Next time I'll call you, never mind gege, I'll even call you master, all right?"

Fu Shen threateningly poked him in the chest. "Fuck off."

"Anyway, weren't you pleased last night?" Yan Xiaohan said quietly, a smile in his voice. "The Lord Marquis truly is ruthless to still not appreciate the favor when I worked so hard to serve you."

Fu Shen blushed from the roots of his ears and irritably said, "Darling, the Lord Marquis hopes next time you'll lie flat. There's no need for so much initiative."

Yan Xiaohan gave a "hey" and said curiously, "You want to have a seat and do it yourself?"

For his loose tongue, Lord Yan was thrown out of bed on the spot by the "delicate jade" in his arms. He crept out hugging the wall, tail between his legs.

* * *

Emperor Yuantai dismissed court sessions for three days because of his illness. After Yan Xiaohan's memorial to the throne was sent up, as expected, he received a summons that same day. The manner of the eunuch passing along the message was even more eagerly attentive toward him than before. This was very significant.

First, he had fulfilled his assignment well; regardless of what the truth was, His Majesty was at least satisfied with the outcome of these two cases. Second, Emperor Yuantai was seriously ill; apart from the princes coming into the palace every day to attend upon the patient, only a few long-serving old ministers of eminent virtue had been summoned; discussion was heated in the outside world, with all kinds of guesses. That His Majesty would remember Yan Xiaohan at a time like this was sufficient to say that he was present in the emperor's mind.

The location of the audience, as before, was Yangxin Hall.

Emperor Yuantai and the empress hadn't been deeply in love, but the empress had been cautious in speech and action for many years and had never been put out of place, and the Yang family had gained merit in battle serving the emperor; this was why, while he wasn't especially fond of her, Emperor Yuantai had accorded her considerable trust. But for Empress Yang to have silently cooked up such a scandal right under Emperor Yuantai's nose, as an Emperor and as a man, this undoubtedly constituted a huge slap in the face for Emperor Yuantai.

His Majesty had evidently sustained a heavy shock. Yan Xiaohan was startled when he saw him. There was sickliness all over that lofty man's face. His eyes, always looking down in disdain, were clouded and dim. There was white at his temples. There was no longer any trace of the appearance of a majestic and competent monarch; these were clear omens of senility and decay.

Emperor Yuantai listened to him analyze past events one by one. He gave him a few token sentences of praise, then suddenly changed the subject without warning. "Menggui, when We are dead, which of Our sons do you think will be able to take over the empire?"

Cold sweat instant rolled down Yan Xiaohan's back.

As a minister, the most taboo thing was to speak out of turn and take a side when it came to the succession. Unless he'd had his fill of living, he wouldn't dare to answer when asked a question like this.

Fortunately, last night, apart from fooling around, he and Fu Shen had also discussed some proper business, and in that was contained a ready-made answer. Yan Xiaohan focused. He first declined to answer modestly. "I fear I do not dare to opine on Your Majesty's family affairs."

Emperor Yuantai took no notice of this, waving a hand. "There is no harm in speaking your mind."

So Yan Xiaohan reworked what Fu Shen had said last night, added in some praise, and recited it to Emperor Yuantai, the gist being, "No one but you could do it, you must look after your health and continue to teach your sons."

This flattery hit the spot for Emperor Yuantai. Visible to the naked eye, his expression softened. He pondered in silence for a long time, then said with emotion, "We have appraised you rightly."

For an ordinary minister, it would be a lifetime's luck to be given an audience with the emperor. But Yan Xiaohan was often taken aside by Emperor Yuantai and given his absolute confidence. This was an opportunity that many important and powerful ministers couldn't get even by asking. But he didn't want any special treatment. He'd had enough of alarms and trepidation. Yan Xiaohan would rather have picked up a sword and gone out to kill people.

After praising him, Emperor Yuantai continued, "According to the official petitions, the taxes paid this year by Jingchu are about twenty percent less than last year. Investigation shows that those two places have experienced neither drought nor flood, and have not had any man-made disasters, but many people mortgaged their land and became refugees. We have already commanded Prince Qing to set out next month and proceed personally to Jingchu to investigate. Take some people to accompany him and provide protection. If there is some critical state of affairs there, it will be convenient for you to act."

Having said all those useless words, in the end he was giving him work. Yan Xiaohan secretly curled his lip in contempt. Who would have imagined that the next moment, Emperor Yuantai would say, "When you have returned to court, in your capacity as Imperial Investigator of the Feilong Guard, you will enter the Yinghua Hall Assembly."

This time, Yan Xiaohan was thoroughly shocked.

The Yinghua Hall Assembly had started at the establishment of the current dynasty. When the founding emperor had encountered matters in which he was uncertain, he often summoned all his ministers to Yinghua Hall to hold an audience. Over time, this had become a fixed practice.

When later emperors were unable to look after affairs of state due to illness or other causes, they would hold the Yinghua Hall

Assembly. At first only the prime minister and grand secretaries could take part, but later the scope had gradually expanded to include the ministers of the six ministries. When the emperor was unable to manage, Yinghua Hall would act as the center of administration. The ministers would work together to decide affairs of state. After their petitions were sent in, they would require the written permission of the emperor; then they could be issued to the court to be put into effect.

Since the founding of Great Zhou, there was no precedent for a general to be included in the Yinghua Palace Assembly, never mind that Yan Xiaohan wasn't even a proper general. He was a court lackey most deeply hated by the civil officials, a genuine article sycophantic minister.

Emperor Yuantai was probably delirious from illness. What was the difference between sending Yan Xiaohan to Yinghua Hall and tossing a wolf into a herd of sheep?

Yan Xiaohan had no idea how he had left the palace, nor how he floated back home like a wandering ghost. This state lasted until Fu Shen pushed away the servants and, composed and stern, said, "Everyone move aside. I think he must have run into some evil influence. No need to worry. I guarantee that he'll be right as rain with a couple of slaps."

Yan Xiaohan was unamused. He grabbed Fu Shen's hand in a daze and said blankly, "Jingyuan, His Majesty wanted to reopen the Yinghua Hall Assembly."

Fu Shen, confused, said, "Well, let him open it. Does it have anything to do with you?"

Yan Xiaohan nodded.

"Hm?" said Fu Shen.

"It does have to do with me," said Yan Xiaohan.

"Wh..." Fu Shen was briefly stunned, then suddenly realized what he meant. His head began to pound wildly. "His Majesty is permitting you to enter the Yinghua Hall Assembly?"

Setting foot in the center of administration amounted more or less to going directly from a lower third rank official to an upper first rank one. It meant that he could participate in affairs of state, formally join the ranks of the pinnacle of authority.

Even Fu Shen with his high position wasn't qualified to enter the Yinghua Hall Assembly; that showed how high its threshold was. And the Yinghua Hall Assembly had always been monopolized by civil officials. It was because of this that the fashion in Great Zhou was to value civil arts over military ones. All these years, the civil officials had kept down the military officials. Supposing that Yan Xiaohan set this precedent, even the atmosphere in court would change.

"Why would he suddenly just..." Fu Shen said in disbelief. "His Majesty isn't going to... uh, you know?"

"I don't think so." Now that Yan Xiaohan was holding Fu Shen's hand and looking at him, he had slowly calmed down. He related every detail of his audience. Smart as Fu Shen was, he immediately understood his ideas.

"I'm afraid His Majesty doesn't have much confidence in the princes.

"He wants to use you as a check on Their Highnesses."

Their eyes met, their thoughts coinciding without prearrangement. Among the tens of thousands of wild threads, Fu Shen acutely grasped the central point. "Why you?"

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

FOR EMPEROR YUANTAI TO ENTRUST HIM WITH BEIYAN'S MILITARY authority, not stint to make an exception to bring him into the palace, even to treat him as the emperor's mouthpiece in Yinghua Hall, putting a check on the princes—this wasn't just putting him in an important position anymore; this was practically treating him as halfway to a member of the family.

Fu Shen said suspiciously, "I suppose you're the one who's actually His Majesty's son?"

Yan Xiaohan laughed in spite of himself, deliberately teasing him: "If I really were His Majesty's son, there would be two princesses in the Fu family."

Fu Shen was unamused.

Yan Xiaohan picked up a pot and replenished his cup of tea. Removing his joking expression, he said, "Jingyuan, do you know who the person His Majesty trusts most is?"

Fu Shen answered without taking the time to think: "Himself."

Yan Xiaohan had meant to gravely and seriously give him a detailed analysis; instead, Fu Shen's answer made him laugh. He distinctly felt the drab shadow cast over his heart by the past slowly fading. It seemed that in front of this person, the most colossal matters could be passed over with a laugh.

"And apart from himself?" Yan Xiaohan said.

Fu Shen really had no idea how to answer.

With Emperor Yuantai's paranoia so severe, he didn't trust generals who held military power, didn't trust brothers who had blood ties to him, didn't trust his sons with their eyes on the throne, didn't trust civil officials secretly divided into camps... Thinking about it this way and that, he couldn't come up with a single candidate. Fu Shen pursed his lips, thinking to himself that Emperor Yuantai really was the solitary emperor in the flesh.

Yan Xiaohan casually said, "He trusts military officials over civil officials. He trusts those right under his nose over officers commanding garrisons. So compared to you, he trusts me more."

Fu Shen motioned hitting him. Yan Xiaohan laughed and grabbed his hand, gently squeezing. "The Feilong Guard and the North Yamen Imperial Guard have always been his secret weapon. After that are the five great capital barracks, because Wang Zhen, the commander of the barracks, is a lone official who isn't part of any faction. The imperial city's troops won't do. Then there's Commandery Prince Xiping. He hasn't made a peep over the years, hasn't shown off, has kept a low profile. His Majesty has more confidence in old ministers."

Of course none of the people he mentioned were unfamiliar to Fu Shen. In current talk, there were four "pillars of state," which was to say Great Zhou's four most celebrated military officers who currently stood guard in various quarters. Specifically, these were the Beiyan Cavalry Commander, Fu Shen; Commandery Prince Xiping, Duan Guihong; the East Sea Navy's Provincial Commander, Sa Zhimu; and the capital barracks' commander, Wang Zhen.

Wang Zhen had always been unassuming, even more so than Duan Guihong. The reason Commandery Prince Xiping's name wasn't well known in the capital was that he was located far away, and it was hard for information to travel. Wang Zhen was at the

West Mountain Garrison not far from the capital, and after so many years, he hadn't made any kind of stir. Many people only knew of the capital barracks. When the commander of the capital barracks was mentioned, they had to rack their brains for a while to come up with his name.

But it was the Beiyan Cavalry, the five great capital barracks, and the imperial guards who together constituted the three major defenses of the capital.

"So?" Fu Shen asked. "What are you trying to say?"

"People who can obtain His Majesty's trust must not claim merit, must not join factions, must be unassuming in conduct, and it's best for them to be old ministers." Smiling, Yan Xiaohan asked, "You still haven't thought of anyone?"

Fu Shen gave it up. "Tell me."

Yan Xiaohan said, "A eunuch."

Fu Shen's first reaction was to direct his gaze downward, glancing at Yan Xiaohan's lower body. "No? You seem pretty normal and uncut?"

Yan Xiaohan was speechless.

It took Fu Shen a moment to realize that his thoughts had gone astray. He was so embarrassed he covered his face with his hands. Yan Xiaohan held back his laughter, pulling him in front of himself by the arms of his wheelchair. The two of them were knee-to-knee. He said in deadly earnest, "Don't be embarrassed. We're an old married couple, what is there to be embarrassed about? Give me your hands. Lord Marquis, when are you planning to test out whether I'm normal or not?"

Fu Shen clenched his teeth and said, "I'm planning to have you test out a discipline rod first."

Yan Xiaohan laughed. Fu Shen held out for a while, then also couldn't resist laughing. "... Indecent scoundrel. We're talking about serious business. Get up."

"Do you still remember Duan Linglong?" Yan Xiaohan had laughed enough, but he still kept hold of his hands, unwilling to let go. "You hadn't entered court then, yet. You didn't witness how he could have his way. Now that was what you call being present in the emperor's mind, enjoying endless imperial favor.

"Eunuchs have no children and enter the palace when they're young. The only support they have is the emperor's favor and trust. So Duan Linglong was truly loyal to His Majesty. If you were to say that His Majesty has ever trusted someone with his whole heart and soul, then he would be the only one," Yan Xiaohan said. "Perhaps no one would believe me if I said this, but when Duan Linglong died, His Majesty did indeed shed tears for him.

"After I was born, I was abandoned at the gate of Wanxiang Temple. Wanxiang Temple belongs to the imperial family. It's full of consorts and concubines who have become nuns and spend all their time in company with oil lamps and old Buddhas. They took pity on me and were moved by compassion, so they took me into the temple to be fostered.

"Common people are not permitted to enter Wanxiang Temple. They guessed that perhaps some palace maid had had an illegitimate child, and, worried that she wouldn't be able to raise me but unable to make up her mind to strangle me, brought me to Wanxiang Temple to leave my life and death up to fate. So I can't belong to the imperial bloodline. That His Majesty trusts me is purely because my adopted father was Duan Linglong."

Fu Shen's heart tightened as he listened to this. He hesitated, then gently patted the back of his hand.

Yan Xiaohan said, "Duan Linglong was in love with one of the temple nuns and often secretly came to Wanxiang Temple. He heard that the temple had picked up an abandoned baby, and since he couldn't have heirs, he acknowledged me as his adopted son. I received his instruction for many years. My martial arts skills were also all passed on by him. This continued until I was seventeen, when he brought me into the imperial guard."

Over the years, there were two points people had most castigated Yan Xiaohan for. First was his peculiar conduct and ruthless means. Second was the fact that he admitted a eunuch as his adopted father, indicating that he was seeking connections with treacherous officials and harboring evil designs.

Even though it had been a long time since Fu Shen had cared about the rumors around him, now he still couldn't help giving a regretful sigh of "I see."

Not very tenderly, he pulled Yan Xiaohan into his arms, but he thought that anything he might say would seem feeble. All his feelings turned into inexpressible heartache. He wished he could return to the past and hug that still young and tender boy like this.

Yan Xiaohan allowed himself to be hugged. Softly, he said, "Don't pity me."

"Right, I'm not pitying you, I just want to hide you," Fu Shen said. "Since I can't be a princess, then you'll have to behave and be the Marquis of Jingning's lady, all right?"

Yan Xiaohan laughed soundlessly and continued, "His Majesty already knew about Duan Linglong and that nun, and naturally he also knew about me. When Duan Linglong was seriously ill, he ordered me to swear an oath at his bedside never to have children and to serve my sovereign with all my heart. After his death, His Majesty promoted me to Imperial Investigator of the Feilong Guard."

Though Yan Xiaohan didn't belong to the imperial bloodline, the emperor had still more or less watched him grow up. His background had determined that he would naturally be isolated by civil officials. He was also the successor that Duan Linglong had personally educated. An out-and-out solitary and loyal official, a known quantity inside and out. Of course Emperor Yuantai would dare to confidently and boldly make use of him.

"Why did you agree?" Fu Shen asked. "If you hadn't joined the Feilong Guard, you still could have lived very well. There are endless paths in this world. Why must you choose the hardest one to walk?"

Yan Xiaohan asked in turn, "The year the Eastern Tartars invaded the border, why did you choose to go into battle?"

Fu Shen said, "You think I did it willingly? I was forced."

Yan Xiaohan was silent for a long time, then at last seemed to reach a decision. He opened his mouth and spoke with great difficulty. "There was a person. Perhaps I would never be able to stand shoulder to shoulder with him, but I could place him in my heart and watch him from afar, occasionally say a few words to him. That would also be good."

Fu Shen didn't know what he was going to say next, but as if he had a premonition, his heart began to beat wildly and rapidly.

"But later, he was forced to go to the northern front."

Fu Shen's mind emptied.

It seemed to be what he had expected, yet also entirely beyond expectation.

"Everyone knew that the fighting was dangerous, that it would mean going and not coming back. And of all the high-ranking officials at court, not one person stepped forward to block that fatal assignment for him," Yan Xiaohan said. "Only then did I learn how little weight the words of the lowly carry. I didn't even have the right to dream of what I couldn't have."

He laughed in self-mockery. "So infamy was all right, not having children wouldn't hurt. As long as I could climb upward, I would have agreed to anything."

"Don't speak of it…" Fu Shen's chest undulated violently. He held him down one-handed and hoarsely said, "Yan-xiong, I know, don't speak of it again…"

"It's all right, it's all in the past." Yan Xiaohan hugged him, tenderly stroking his tense back. "I only mentioned it because you brought it up. It was my own obstinate persistence to begin with, you don't need to pity me for it, and don't think you bear any responsibility. That I could reach where I am today proves that I didn't choose wrong back then."

"Had I known before…"

Yan Xiaohan imagined the scene. "Had you known, you probably would have gathered up a crowd of rich kids and beaten me to death on the spot."

When they had brushed shoulders at the city gates, it had been a fleeting glimpse of beauty. He had casually tossed a twin lotus and drawn up a lifetime's desire and sweetness.

The shared adversity beneath the cliff, the unforeseen squabble, the rupture, the reconciliation… For seven years they had kept each other at arm's length, yet they had always been present, walking toward each other from distant, opposite ends. Though the road had been long, they had finally met. The closeness he had once thought he could hardly yearn for was now at last within reach.

"When you went to war, there was nothing I could do." Comfortingly, Yan Xiaohan said, "Fortunately I later became the Imperial Investigator. When His Majesty was arranging a marriage for you, I was the first one he thought of. You see, this is what they call anything being attainable with sincere conviction."

After a brief silence, Fu Shen couldn't resist being earnest. "And if His Majesty hadn't arranged this marriage?"

Looking at him, Yan Xiaohan laughed. "Lord Marquis, I'm not your sort of upright gentleman. Since I was willing to put up a life-or-death struggle as Imperial Investigator, then even if His Majesty hadn't permitted it, I still would have carried you off. If the court's dog wasn't harming a loyal and upright subject, how would I be living up to all the rumors in the empire?"

Hearing this, Fu Shen knew right away that he was talking nonsense, but his heart still ached. He tapped on his back. "A total waste of a pretty face. How can you be so stubborn?"

Yan Xiaohan easily said, "One look at you interfered with the rest of my life. What could I do?"

The words he hadn't said were all concealed in the gentleness of his regard when he smiled.

Supposing that Emperor Yuantai hadn't arranged this marriage, however unprincipled Yan Xiaohan was, he probably still wouldn't have done something like carrying off the Marquis of Jingning by force. Perhaps they would have spent the rest of their lives pretending to be like fire and water, acting like strangers.

One look at you interfered with the rest of my life.

Fu Shen could interfere with his life, but he couldn't have interfered with Fu Shen's life.

"All right." Yan Xiaohan let him go and was just about to retreat when he suddenly paused, his collar seized out of nowhere.

"I'm really sorry for having interfered with the rest of your life." Fu Shen leaned back, relaxed, the corners of his lips turning up. Magnanimously, he said, "Come on, you can interfere back now."

End of Part One.

GLOSSARY

Golden Terrace | 黄金台 | *noun* | huáng jīn tái

The eponymous dais in the story, named after its golden beauty under the sunlight, is based on the real-life "Golden Terrace," also known as Zhaoxian Terrace, in China. It is also an elevated land believed to be a historical location formerly used to recruit talented individuals. The Golden Terrace was attributed to King Zhao of Yan (335-279 B.C.), the 39th King of the State of Yan during the Warring States period of ancient China under the Zhou Dynasty. It was believed to be the location where King Zhao and his mentor Guo Wei recruited many talents to help rule the State of Yan and develop into a powerful political entity during the Warring States period. The legacy of King Zhao's Golden Terrace has been passed down in the form of poetry and other historical documents; the current location of the dais is in the province of Hebei, China.

Cut-sleeve | **断袖** | *noun/adj* | duàn xiù

An old euphemism in ancient China that refers to gay men. The phrase's origin can be traced back to a story from the Western Han Dynasty (circa 202 B.C. to 195 B.C.), featuring the Emperor Ai of Han and his court official Dong Xian. It was said that Emperor Ai woke up one morning to see that his lover was sleeping beside him and under his sleeve and decided to cut his sleeves with a knife not to wake his lover as a gesture of affection.

Yuantai | 元泰 | *noun* | yuán tài

The fictional Era name is used for the period the story takes place. Eras names (年号, niánhào) are typically unique for each emperor in reign and is recognized as a symbol of legitimate authority within the empire. The renaming of an era name indicates the start of a new regnal year. Emperors in reign are also often referred to by their designated Era name.

Qisha Star | 七杀星 | *noun* | qī shā xīng

In Chinese astronomy, Qisha is the star of Polis (Mu Sagittarii Aa) from the Southern Dipper constellation (also known as Sagittarius in Western astronomy). In Zi Wei Dou Shu (Chinese Purple Star Astrology fortune-telling), the Qisha is also one of the three stars that make up a famous chart type known as Sha Po Lang, which occurs when one of the stars, Qisha, Pojun, or Tanlang enter the Life Palace in the Zi Wei chart. Because the celestial bodies are fixed and the three stars will always appear together when one is in the Life Palace, the three stars are often studied as a set in Zi Wei destiny science. The Sha Po Lang chart is famously known in Chinese history as the destiny of revolutionary military generals, politicians, and other famous figures who change the tides of history. However, because people born under the stars of Sha Po Lang are often rebellious, warlike, and ahead of their times, it was commonly believed to be a bad omen to be born under these stars. Qisha is an especially aggressive star associated with the element fire, and many famous military generals throughout Chinese history have been born under this star.

Taijian | 太监 | *noun* | tài jiàn

A Eunuch of the imperial court. These castrated male civil servants were favored by officials under the Emperor, with varying degrees of authority throughout different dynasties. Eunuchs often represent the Emperor or the palace they serve in diplomatic situations and shoulder plenty of responsibilities in the imperial court. The Imperial Eunuch system in China lasted from around the Han Dynasty until the early 20th Century.

Imperial Guard | 禁军 | *noun* | jìn jūn

Also known as the Forbidden Troops, the Imperial Guard is a garrison of elites tasked to guard the Emperor in China. Historically, the function of the Imperial Guard evolved throughout the dynasties from personal bodyguards to a military force that serves the Emperor directly.

Capping ceremony | 冠礼 | *noun* | guàn lǐ

A coming-of-age ceremony traditionally celebrated in ancient China by the Han ethnic people for young boys who reach the age of adulthood at 20. The ceremony is conducted by the father, who coronates the new young adult with a traditional black-linen cap to indicate a rite of passage. The act of coronation will be conducted three times to symbolize the young man's ability as an adult to help others, serve his nation, and attend religious ceremonies.

The three judicial chief ministries | 三法司 | *noun* | sān fǎ sī

The name was given to the three governmental bodies holding the highest authority in judiciary affairs in ancient China. The fictional three ministries in this novel are based on the system from the Ming Dynasty's judiciary system, which consisted of the Ministry of Justice (刑部, Xing Bu), the Court of Judicial Review (大理寺, Da Li Si), and the Court of Censorate (都察院, Du Cha Yuan).

It is year twenty-five of the Yuantai Era of the Great Zhou Empire. The renowned Marquis of Jingning, commander of the Beiyan Cavalry, Fu Shen is injured on the battlefield at the northern border. Returning with a broken leg to the capital, Fu Shen learns that the emperor has conferred a marriage for him—with another man. To make matters worse, Fu Shen's spouse is his political nemesis: the famed Imperial Investigator of the Feilong Guard, Yan Xiaohan.

In spite of the political differences that stand between them in court, Fu Shen and Yan Xiaohan gradually start to accept each other's presence in their shared home. Yet as they learn to navigate their new life together, it is the calm before the storm. The mystery behind the attack at the northern border begins to unfold, unveiling dangers that threaten the peace of Great Zhou.

About The Author

Cang Wu Bin Bai is an acclaimed author on the Jinjiang Wenxuecheng platform. Her writing combines a witty style with flowing prose and twisting plotlines, garnering a much devoted readership. *Golden Terrace* is her masterpiece novel.

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